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THE R. I. N. STRIKE

by
A Group of
Victimised R. I. N. Ratings



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TWO RUPEES

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CONTENTS

PREFACE BY E. M. S. NAMBOODIRIPAD	vii
PUBLISHERS' NOTE	xiii
ABBREVIATIONS	xv
INTRODUCTION	1
I. THE STORM BURSTS.	7
II. THE OPENING BATTLES	14
III. THE BRITISH OFFENSIVE BEGINS	28
IV. ON THE EVE OF THE BATTLE	39
V. IN DEFENCE OF FREEDOM	47
VI. THE SURRENDER	62
VII. A LONE BATTLE	76
VIII. BATTLE ON THE 'HINDUSTAN'	83
IX. IN INDIA AND ABROAD	92
X. A SHIP AT SEA	98
XI. IN AID OF THE DISTRESSED	106

XII.	SOLDIERS AND AIRMEN ANSWER THE CALL	144
XIII.	FOR A COMMON CAUSE	127
XIV.	FROM PANIC TO TRIUMPHANT REPRESSION	136
	TOWARDS A PEOPLE'S NAVY	158
	A DIARY OF EVENTS	163

PREFACE

THE absorbing story of the RIN uprising of 1946, given in this volume, was written by a group of victimised ratings who had themselves participated in the heroic revolt. Though the manuscript had been ready as early as 1947, it could not so far see the light of day. Readers will no doubt feel happy that it is coming out now.

This story tells of innumerable men roused to action against the arrogant, oppressive behaviour of their British (as well as British-trained Indian) officers who treated them with the utmost contempt. These men of the Navy, however, were moved by something higher than resentment against the way in which their officers treated them; they were moved by the universally-felt anxiety of the Indian people to quickly and finally put an end to the British rule over their country.

The uprising in the Navy was an inseparable part of the glorious struggles which every section of the Indian people were then waging in order to force the British rulers to quit India—struggles such as the country-wide demonstrations for the release of the INA men; the "Quit Kashmir" movement led by the Kashmir National Conference; the struggle for responsible Government in Travancore which brought the great working class into heroic political action at Punnapra and Vayalar; the anti-Razakar movement of the Telangana peasantry; the country-wide strike wave which gripped industry after industry and touched even sections of the Government services; innumerable struggles of the peasantry, the foremost of which was the Tebhaga struggle of Bengal.

The RIN uprising had, therefore, a close resemblance to another memorable event—the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. For, both the 1857 Mutiny as well as the 1946 uprising were

indications that the proud Indian people were determined to throw the foreign rulers out of the country and to build up their own future in the way they liked.

While the mutiny was the earliest large-scale effort of the Indian people for freeing the country of foreign rule, while therefore the foreign rulers could crush it in a comparatively short time, the 1946 uprising was so powerful that they could not even dream of such a thing; they therefore had to resort to other manoeuvres and stratagems.

This they could do because of the basic weakness of the anti-imperialist movement of the period of the Second World War and of the post-war years; though it had rallied all sections of the people, its dominant leadership remained in the hands of the bourgeoisie and sections of the feudal classes.

It is true that millions upon millions of the working people — industrial and agricultural workers, peasants, middle-class employees, handicraftsmen, small shopkeepers, etc. — joined the movement and showed the greatest amount of heroism, initiative and resourcefulness. It is also true that these working people built up their own organs of struggle in several places and that several of them were led by the Communist Party and other revolutionary parties and groups.

The fact, however, remains that the large mass of these working people were loyal to the political parties of the bourgeoisie and the landlords—the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. That was why when the RIN ratings decided to pull down the symbol of imperialist power from their ships and establishments, they replaced it not by the flag of the working people alone,—the Red Flag with the hammer and sickle—but a combination of three flags, the Red Flag with the hammer and sickle, the Congress flag and the Muslim League flag.

That the flag of the working people was proudly flying in the ships and establishments for the duration of the uprising was an indication of the new social forces that were moving the thousands of men who had risen against the British rule.

This fact, however, was nothing more than an indication of the direction in which the anti-imperialist movement was moving. The fact that the flag of the working people

could not fly alone but had to fly together with the Congress and the Muslim League flags showed how the leadership of the bourgeoisie and landlords were still powerful among the mass of the common people.

It was this weakness of the anti-imperialist movement that the British rulers took maximum advantage of. The moment the great wave of post-war struggles appeared on the scene, the shrewd and clever rulers of Britain found that they were in no position to do what they could do 89 years ago; they could not crush the uprising through the use of naked brute force, but had to use clever manoeuvres designed to divide and disrupt it.

In this plan of dividing and disrupting the anti-imperialist movement, the British rulers got a willing ally in the bourgeois-landlord leaderships of the Indian National Congress. They agreed to the most disgraceful terms offered by the British — terms which no self-respecting Indian nationalist can accept. They agreed to maintain untouched the large interests of the British capitalists over the factories, plantations, banks, foreign trade, etc. They also agreed to keep a large number of British officers in strategic posts. Furthermore, they agreed to respect the rights and privileges of the 600 odd feudal rulers of the so-called "princely states", as well as of the landed and other properties of the big landlords. It was on the basis of these terms that the British ultimately agreed to transfer power.

Their policy of negotiations and ultimate compromise with the British rulers made it necessary for the leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League to see that the struggles of the common people are not allowed to develop into a country-wide mass revolutionary upsurge but that each of these struggles should separately be ended as quickly as possible. How this was done in the case of the RIN uprising can be seen in the way in which Sardar Patel and Mahommed Ali Jinnah "advised" the RIN ratings to lay down their arms. Had it not been for this "advice" of the Congress and League leaders, the RIN uprising would have developed in a different direction; had it not been for this policy pursued by them in relation to every struggle that broke out in that period, we would have seen something different from the 1947 transfer of power, according to which the iron grip of the British rulers was allowed to continue.

The story of the RIN uprising which is narrated in the present volume would therefore be seen as a story of heroism, initiative and resourcefulness of the common people as well as of the shameful betrayal on the part of the bourgeois-landlord leaders of the anti-imperialist movement. Reading how the uprising developed from stage to stage, we bow our heads respectfully before the thousands of unknown ratings who pulled down the symbol of British authority and raised aloft in its place the banners of the Congress, the League and of the Communist Party; we also bow our heads in shame for the disgraceful act committed by the leaders of the two parties to whom those thousands of heroic soldiers had looked for leadership in the historic struggle that they had then launched.

The effect of this disgraceful action on the part of the Congress and League leaders can be seen today. For, though the British army of occupation has been withdrawn, the new national army commanded by Indian officers is far from a really independent national army; its organisation, training and supplies are "co-ordinated with" (dependent upon) those of the Commonwealth. The conferences that are frequently being held between the officers of the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force, and their counterparts in the Commonwealth are the media through which British imperialism is allowed to have real control over our defence organisation. Such a dependence of the Indian armed forces on the armed forces of the British Commonwealth is a serious threat to the integrity of our country as a free and sovereign nation. For, however much India's Prime Minister may claim that his foreign policy is "a policy of peace and non-alignment with any aggressive war bloc", he cannot follow a really peaceful and independent foreign policy so long as the armed forces of the country are "co-ordinated with" those of the Commonwealth, many of whose members are members of such aggressive military organisations as the NATO and the proposed SEATO.

Nor should it be forgotten that the ruling circles of Pakistan have gone a step further; from the joint India-Pakistan line of "co-ordinating" their defence organisation with that of the Commonwealth, they have gone forward to joining the United States in her aggressive plans, such as the US-Pak Pact and the Manila talks with a view to the formation of the aggressive SEATO organisation.

But neither the people of India nor their brethren in Pakistan are prepared to tolerate this state of affairs. A tremendous movement is developing, both in India as well as in Pakistan, against the policies of their ruling circles. Larger and larger masses in India and Pakistan are coming out in favour of a genuinely national, independent foreign policy, as well as for a genuinely democratic policy at home. This was clearly visible in the results of the 1951-52 General Elections in India as well as the recent elections in East Pakistan.

The anti-imperialist masses in the two countries are demanding the withdrawal of India and Pakistan from the British Commonwealth, confiscation of all British capital and other measures calculated to wipe out all traces of British domination. They are also demanding the cancellation of the US-Pak Military Pact as well as such agreements entered into by India with the United States as the Technical Co-operation Agreement, as they infringe on our sovereignty.

All those who carry on such a struggle for the real and genuine independence and sovereignty of India and Pakistan will take inspiration from the story of the heroic deeds of the RIN ratings given in this volume.

September 23, 1954.

E. M. S. Namboodiripad



NOTE

THE manuscript of this book was submitted to us early in 1947, just a little more than a year after the RIN strike. For a number of reasons the book could not be published earlier. Except for a few minor editorial corrections, no attempt has been made to revise the manuscript.

— *Publishers*



ABBREVIATIONS

BORs	:	British Other Ranks
CCO	:	Central Communications Office
CO	:	Commanding Officer
CPO	:	Chief Petty Officer
DSS	:	Deck Signal Station
FOB	:	Flag Officer, Bombay
FOCRIN	:	Flag Officer Commanding, RIN
HAS	:	High Angle School
IO	:	Intelligence Officer
IORs	:	Indian Other Ranks
NHQ	:	Naval Headquarters
NOIC	:	Naval Officer In Charge
NCSC	:	Naval Central Strike Committee
OOD	:	Officer of the Day
PO	:	Petty Officer
PSO	:	Principal Staff Officer
RCO	:	Remote Control Office
RIASC	:	Royal Indian Army Service Corps
WRINS	:	Women's RIN Service



INTRODUCTION

"The R.I.N. episode has opened an altogether new chapter in the history of the armed forces of India".

—Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

THE now world-famous strike in the Indian Navy, in February, 1946, was thus characterised by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Indeed it was a very true estimate, for the Naval strike marked a new stage in our freedom struggle.

The RIN strike marked the end of the period when Indian servicemen could be used for the suppression of the Indian freedom struggle.

The RIN strike marked the beginning of a period when Indian servicemen would join hands more and more with the Indian people for the building of a free and happy India.

In 1946, the full story of those five historic days when the Naval ratings once and for all broke the barriers that had isolated them from the people was not available. Today, many of the victimised ratings are back in their homes after serving their terms of imprisonment. They have a great story to tell of the courage, leadership, initiative and patriotism of these gallant fighters.

A study of that story enables us fully to understand the importance of the RIN strike in the history of our national movement.

What was the political background to the great uprising?

The end of the war saw the world in a state of unrest, both political and economic. In India the political situation was most acute. Within two months of the end of the war, the first post-war battles of the Indian people against imperialism started. The sufferings of six years of war, the pent-up hatred of 200 years, began to find expression

in an unprecedented freedom upsurge of the common people seeking to break through the stranglehold of dying imperialism.

The Release INA Prisoners demonstrations of November saw the heroism of the people on the streets of Calcutta. Then came February 1946. Once again all sections of the people were out on the streets demanding the release of Rashid Ali of the INA. Hard on the heels of these struggles and influenced by them came the strikes in the RIAF.

The RIN strike was the logical culmination of these mass struggles for freedom. By their death-defying action the Naval ratings opened new avenues of struggle and created an opportunity for the final assault on the tottering structure of imperialism. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that at that time the entire foundations of the feudal-imperialist structure in India had been loosened. The strike spread to the other arms of the Services, to the other limbs of the Government, like the police. The people rallied to their support. All that was needed then was for the leaders of the two main political organisations in the country, the Congress and the League, to head this mass upsurge and sweep away all the vestiges of British imperialism before it.

But it was not to be. One year after the strike, it seemed as if the Naval strike had achieved nothing. The sufferings of the ratings continued. The grievances against which they fought were not redressed. The pledges made to them by the nation's leaders at the time of the surrender were not fulfilled. The British stayed on in India and tried to disrupt the freedom upsurge by communal riots. The courageous though short-lived resistance of the Naval ratings which had sent a thrill of hope through the entire people of the country seemed to have been forgotten and buried in the dung-heap of fratricidal hate.

The time has now come to measure the gains and losses, to learn the lessons and go forward. The story of the RIN strike has a lot to teach us, for it heralded a new period of revolutionary upheaval.

The first thing to understand is how such a strike in the armed forces became possible. The tradition of the Indian Armed Forces had been to fight the battles of British imperialism. To our people they had always been a mercenary force of occupation. The British tried their best to inculcate this spirit in the armed forces, by appealing to the

racial prejudices of the men, their military traditions, and by isolating them from the people.

Yet, as true sons of India these men have always responded in one way or other to the call of the freedom struggle. As early as 1857 the Sepoy Mutiny had threatened the very existence of the British in India. The armed forces rose in those days because they had seen, and themselves felt, the widespread hatred of their people for the *firangees*. They themselves had felt the insults and the shame of slavery.

The British tided over the crisis by coming to an understanding with the feudal princes who led the Mutiny. The entire armed forces were reorganised. The Indian officers were removed and the Army was brought completely under British control, officered entirely by Britishers. Seeds of disruption sown through racial conflicts and communal differences soon made the men entirely dependent on their white officers. For years they despaired of fighting for freedom. They had become a class apart.

Then came the first World War. While the political leadership in the country cooperated with the Government, terrorist groups prepared for armed uprisings and preached discontent among the troops. Pingley's stories of those days are well known. Trouble broke out in various parts of the country.

But the first great blow was struck by the Gahrwalis in 1930. That was the peak of the great Civil Disobedience Movement. The people were anxious to put an end to the "satanic government" of the British. The Gahrwali soldiers refused to fire on their countrymen. It created a sensation. This again was a new chapter in the history of the armed forces.

The men in the forces realised that they were a part of their people, that they had a role to play in the liberation of their country and they played it, whenever an opportunity presented itself.

In the early years of World War II, 114 members of the 21st Indian Cavalry refused to go abroad to fight in a war which they considered an imperialist war. Four of them were hanged and 110 imprisoned. In 1942, in the wake of the August struggle, many revolts broke out in the armed forces and were ruthlessly suppressed. Between March 1942 and April 1945 there were nineteen mutinies in the

RIN alone. They related to grievances regarding inadequate pay, bad food, uncomfortable accommodation, menial duties and racial discrimination. In 1944, nearly 400 sepoys of the 194 Indian Railway Maintenance Company revolted against unjust punishments. These struggles were carefully hidden from the public and drowned in blood. These various struggles made their contribution to the great RIN uprising.

There were other factors as well. The expansion during the war had brought many different and new elements into the Navy. Their links with the people were closer. They came from all over India—from the Punjab, Bengal and the South, Hindus and Muslims. Among them were workers, peasants and a sizeable proportion of lads from the lower middle class.

Daring, adventurous young men, they took a leading part in clearing the seas of the fascist pirates. They were the boys who trounced the Italian fleet off the African coast in the early days of the war. They were mainly responsible for the hedge-hopping operations along the Arakan coast in 1945 that led to the early capture of Rangoon. They were proud of India, proud of themselves, self-respecting manly youngsters.

Their experiences abroad taught them two very important lessons. They had fought the Germans, the Italians and the Japs shoulder to shoulder with the men of the greatest European powers. Their heroism and gallantry had won them the praise of the world and the fear of the enemy. It had increased their self-confidence. They realised that they were as good as any.

What was more, they had seen with their own eyes the freedom struggle of the peoples of the countries they had helped to liberate from the fascists. They had seen it in Italy, Greece, Burma, Malaya, Indo-China, Indonesia; everywhere it was the same.

For years they had been treated like dirt; they had suffered insults and hardships. But now things were different. They had become politically conscious. Their life had become impossible. Now they were new men. They knew how to fight and what to fight for. They had come back to India, a new India fighting for freedom. They saw how the people rallied behind the INA, how they reflected their own bitter, pent-up hatred of years. So they too plunged into

the fray. They asked for the redressal of their grievances. But, significantly enough, they voiced the popular demands too, for the release of the INA prisoners and the withdrawal of troops from Indonesia.

Studied in this background, it becomes obvious that the RIN strike was not a sudden outburst. It was the expression of years of sufferings. Years of silent struggle found shape and form at last. It ended in defeat but it showed a new way to our people. For the first time the isolation of the armed forces from the people was broken, and for all time to come. It hammered home to our people the need for unity among all sections, all castes, all creeds and all nationalities, as the pre-requisite for a successful battle for freedom.

Our brave brothers in the Navy wrote with their blood a new chapter in the history of our freedom struggle. Nothing can wipe out the memory of those five historic days which shook the very foundations of imperial rule.

As we pay our homage to the martyrs of February 1946 we can only re-echo the last message of the Naval Central Strike Committee to the people of India:

"Our strike has been a historic event in the life of our nation. For the first time the blood of men in the services and the men in the streets flowed together in a common cause.

"We in the services, will never forget this. We know also that you, our brothers and sisters, will not forget."

March, 1947



Chapter One

THE STORM BURSTS

H M I S *Talwar*, at Bombay, was the Signal Training Establishment of the Royal Indian Navy. It had a complement of about 1,500 officers and men, including 700 communication ratings under training and 300 ratings of the "draft reserve" awaiting demobilisation. Known as the second biggest signal training establishment in the British Empire, the *Talwar* had always been commanded by British officers.

As in most units in the Indian armed Forces, life in the *Talwar* had been far from comfortable. Everyone was generally disgusted with things. The officers illtreated the men, called them names. Welfare was generally neglected. The food was bad. The ratings awaiting demobilisation had to wait unnecessarily long for disbursement of their pay.

There had been a change in the command of the unit recently. Lt. Commander Cole, the outgoing commanding officer (CO) had been a comparatively liberal officer. The ratings felt that he had been removed by the Flag Officer Bombay (FOB), Rear-Admiral Rattray, just because he had been somewhat sympathetic towards the men. They recalled how Lt. Commander Cole had refused to take any action against R. K. Singh who had written "Jai Hind" and "Quit India" on the walls of the *Talwar*.

In his place, Commander King took over on January 21. It did not take him long to make himself thoroughly unpopular. For some alleged offence he punished two men without giving them a fair trial.

Once again anti-British slogans began to appear on the walls of the establishment. Leading Telegraphist B. C. Dutt was arrested on February 2 for chalking up political slogans. This enraged the ratings.

On February 6 and 7, someone chalked the words "Quit India" on Commander King's car and deflated the tyres. The culprits could not be traced.

On February 8, an incident occurred which caused great excitement. The first parade for the Central Communications Office (CCO) ratings was at 9:15 a.m. While they were busy dressing in their barracks, the CO suddenly walked in and shouted:

"Get up, you sons of coolies; you sons of Indian bitches."

In surprise the boys turned round. The officer kept on shouting. Unmentionable filth poured out of his mouth.

The CO departed, as he had come, in a storm of rage. It is probably true that the boys had failed to come to attention and salute him as he had entered the room. But then they were too busy getting ready for their parade.

They decided not to bear these insults quietly any longer. But what were they to do? They could not complain collectively—according to regulations in the Navy they were not permitted to put up joint "requests".

So the following morning fourteen ratings individually put in formal complaints against Commander King's language. The complaints were heard by Lt. Commander Snow, Executive Officer, and referred to the CO on February 10.

This officer sensed the deep discontent of the men and sent a personal and confidential letter to Commander King asking him to deal with the matter quickly and tactfully.

Seven days passed. Nothing happened. The CO did not even bother to heed his brother officer's advice. He deferred the hearing till Saturday, the normal day for such work.

On February 16, the fourteen ratings were called to the office of the CO. He was not in a mood to listen to them. He simply warned them against making false complaints and gave them twenty-four hours to think it over, after which they could submit their complaints in writing.

"No use putting in this complaint," he said. "If you cannot prove it you will only get into trouble!"

This was considered to be a threat by most of the ratings, and there was widespread discontent.

The following day, the food served to the ratings was uneatable. The ratings protested. The Duty Officer for the day was a Petty Officer of the Royal Navy. He was unpopular with the ratings because he had been promoted over

the heads of many efficient Indian ratings. Yet they went to him with their complaint about the bad food. But he showed neither sympathy nor concern. He snarled:

"Beggars can't be choosers!"

This was too much. The boys were bewildered. They did not know what to do. They could no longer swallow insult after insult. Something had to be done. But what?

Some in despair said, "There is nothing we can do to get out of this mess. We will give up taking food and die of starvation. That seems the only way we can get out of this humiliating position."

And they went on hunger strike. The authorities however knew nothing of this.

February 18. Food was bad again. The dal was worse than the previous day's. It had been badly cooked, there was no salt in it, it had not even been boiled properly. Everyone walked out of the mess in silent protest.

At 8:30 a.m. the daily morning inspection for divisions (parade) was piped. But not a soul, except a few Chief Petty Officers and Petty Officers turned up on parade.

At the Remote Control Office, the most important branch of the RIN for its day-to-day administration, the ratings came in for their usual morning class. Then they heard of the strike of the CCO ratings. They too walked out and there was no one on parade at 9:30 a.m.

The strike at the *Talwar* was now complete.

The CO and the other British officers were taken by surprise. Most of the Indian officers and the CPOs and POs adopted an attitude of neutrality. For the next two hours nothing happened. The ratings remained peaceful. They sat together in groups discussing the major step that they had suddenly and spontaneously taken. What next?

At about 11 a.m. two Indian Officers, Lt. Kolhi and Lt. Nanda, came and asked them to formulate their grievances. Now, both these officers were rather unpopular with the ratings because, though they were Indians, like many of their colleagues, they thought it beneath their dignity to mix with the ordinary ratings and get to know them better.

In their angry mood the ratings were not prepared to talk to these officers. They refused to say anything.

The first peace feeler having failed, the Flag Officer, Bombay, Rear-Admiral Rattray, came to the *Talwar*.

It was midday. He had with him Capt. Inigo-Jones. He asked the ratings to go back to work since he had come to listen to their grievances. He also promised that Commander King would be removed and replaced by Capt. Inigo-Jones.

The ratings were furious. They recalled the past activities of Inigo-Jones. This was the man who had ruthlessly suppressed a similar strike at the M. T. Barracks, Bombay, in 1944. All together they shouted:

"We do not want Jones. Give us Kolhi or Shaw or any Indian officer."

The FOB was surprised. His plan had failed. He gave lame excuses about Kolhi and Shaw not being available at the moment. Finally, in sheer exasperation, he said that he could not listen to their demands and that they had become indisciplined.

In the meantime, the strike of the RCO ratings caused a considerable amount of dislocation. The authorities had brought in some RN ratings from HMS *Braganza* but they had failed to tackle the job.

This seemed to knock some sense into Rattray's head. He promised the ratings that he would listen to their grievances if they would send twelve representatives to him. Then he appealed to them to allow the RCO ratings to get back to work.

The ratings however refused to listen to this appeal. Nobody was going to work until their grievances were redressed. About sending representatives, they were doubtful and suspicious. It seemed to be a trap. They replied:

"If we send twelve representatives to you, you will punish them as you did before. We are not prepared to send anybody to you. We want a national leader, either from the Congress, the Muslim League or the Communist Party to negotiate between us."

Now this, to Rattray, seemed an impossible demand. He however promised that the representative ratings would not be punished. He gave his word of honour saying there was no point in bringing in outsiders to settle a dispute which was, after all, their own affair.

The ratings agreed.

By the evening the news of the strike in HMIS *Talwar* had spread all over India. The AIR news bulletins had broadcast the story. All the ships in Bombay harbour and the shore establishments had also heard that their comrades in the *Talwar* were fighting for their legitimate rights.

There was excitement everywhere. At Castle Barracks, at Fort Barracks and other shore establishments the ratings gathered in small groups and discussed the situation. It was something new, something unheard of. Yes, there had been strikes before but this seemed different, this seemed to be the beginning of a real big battle. The humiliation, the discrimination, the suffering must be put an end to for all time. The people of the country would help them. They would be free. Something had to be done to support the *Talwar* ratings. But what?

Secret meetings. Conferences of leading ratings. Long discussions. Arguments and counter-arguments. That was what it was like the whole night. Nobody could sleep. Tomorrow they too would join the battle. They too would come out on strike. They too would refuse to bear the insults and sufferings.

A similar situation developed in the ships that night. There were some sixty naval ships in Bombay harbour. As the ratings went back from 'liberty' ashore they took back with them the news of the strike at the *Talwar*.

Here is what happened on HMIS *Gondwana*. "*Talwar* on strike" said someone. From the cabins men poured out into the corridors. Anxious faces asked the same question over and over again.

"*Talwar* on strike?"

"Yes. All the ratings are on hunger strike!"

A few murmurs. A hum of voices. And all gradually dispersed. On their bunks they sat and wondered. Everyone was silent for some time.

A young voice suddenly broke the silence.

"Well, what about us? What are we going to do?"

Another said, "*Ham bhi hartal karenge. Hamare sath jis tarah ka sulook kiya jata hai uska badla lene ka yehi tareeka hai.*" *

One of the senior ratings impatiently interrupted him.

* "We too shall go on strike. This is the only way to avenge ourselves for the treatment meted out to us."

"How can we decide to go on strike without knowing why our comrades on the *Talwar* have taken such a step? First we must find out why they have gone on strike. Only then can we decide anything."

There was a pause. The same speaker continued: "Do you think it is easy to go on strike, without making any preparations? If we are going to decide to go on a sympathetic strike with our brothers in the *Talwar*, the first thing to do is to talk to everyone on the ship and prepare him for the worst. Only if we can do that successfully can we decide to go on strike."

The young rating was furious. They were all afraid to raise their voices, lest the officers happened to hear them. So he spoke in a hoarse impatient whisper. His voice shook with emotion.

"*Kya tum samajhte ho ki ham hartal ke liye tayyar nahin hain? Kya ab bhi tumhara khyal hai ki hartal ke liye larne wale longon ko samjhane ki zaroorat hai? Agar tum aisa samajhte ho to tumhara khyal galath hai.*"*

He paused for a moment. There was silence everywhere. In a choked voice, gradually rising with emotion he continued:

"*Rozana akhbar kholte-hi ekhi bat samne ati hai—Bambai men goli chali! Kalkatte men goli chali! Aj tak is safed chamdi walon ne ham par zoolum kiya. Ab ham inhen dikha denge ki Hindusthani apne bachchon ka badla lena janta hai.*"†

Everyone was considerably moved by these words. The senior ratings assured him that there was no question of not coming out to help their brothers. It was only a question of preparations. They must be so prepared that if they had to lay down their lives in trying to save their brothers they should not flinch.

Nothing was decided that night. Nobody slept. In every bunk there was a sleepless rating puzzling out how he could best help the *Talwar* boys; how best he could avenge the years of suffering.

* "Do you think that we are not prepared for a strike? Do you still think that for a strike it is necessary to explain matters to fighting people? If you do, you are mistaken."

† "Every morning, as one opens the papers, there is only one thing one sees—firing in Bombay! firing in Calcutta! So far the whites have oppressed us. Now we shall show that an Indian knows how to avenge his children."

HMIS *Punjab*. Here the reaction was quick. It was in the afternoon that they heard of the strike. The evening papers published some of the demands of the ratings. This seemed a good basis to proceed on. They decided to call a meeting of the leading ratings of all the branches on the ship.

At 10 p.m. fifteen ratings met to discuss the situation.

The atmosphere was solemn and grave. The demands put forward by the *Talwar* ratings were thoroughly discussed. Everyone agreed that these were the basic demands of all members of the RIN. It was decided that they too would go on strike from the next morning on the basis of these demands. Two representatives were immediately elected to place the demands before their Captain and to inform him about the strike. That was to be the first action the next morning.

The programme for the next day was then discussed in detail. It was decided that after informing the authorities that they were on strike they would pull down the White Ensign and hoist the flags of the three main Indian political parties. Representatives were allotted the job of preparing the different flags from signal flags.

The next step would be to leave their ship and go to the neighbouring ships and request them to join the strike.

Even the slogans were chosen: "Inquilab Zindabad", "Fulfil the demands", "Release I.N.A. prisoners", "Jai Hind" and so on.

The meeting lasted an hour.

The leading ratings now went round the ship and informed all the others about the decision. Everyone promised to join in. They spent the night discussing their plans. All anxiously waited for the dawn.

The news of the strike spread to RIN ships abroad too. HMIS *Baroda* was at Colombo. A communications rating accidentally heard the news from the BBC on his wireless telegraphy set.

He spread the news. From lip to lip it passed. There was great excitement throughout the night. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, they too made their plans to join the great battle.

At last the storm burst. Years of silent suffering and simmering unrest found shape and form at last.

Chapter Two

THE OPENING BATTLES

BOMBAY, February 19. It was D-day. By the morning nearly all the eleven shore establishments in Bombay and its suburbs and some sixty ships in the harbour were on strike. Nearly 20,000 naval ratings were involved.

Fort Barracks. As usual, at 5:30 a.m. the bugle sounded but not a soul stirred. Everyone inside the huge buildings heard it, but today these 350 souls were determined to defy the authorities. It was the beginning of their battle to avenge all insults.

After some time the ratings got up. Already some of them were busy discussing their plans for the day. In small groups they argued. Others ran about looking for the morning papers.

"What do the papers say? Has the strike spread everywhere? What is the news from the *Talwar*?"

With these questions they crowded round the papers, reading the headlines, from behind one another's shoulders.

The Officer of the Day smelt trouble. He was afraid to go and see what the matter was. He promptly rang up the Executive Officer, Lt. Commander Khan, and informed him of "indiscipline at Fort Barracks".

At 6:30 the bugle was sounded again. Normally this was the time for the ratings to fall in on the quarter-deck for "cleanship" duty. But today the ratings laughed aloud. Nobody touched the brooms. They did not bother to make their beds. No. They were too busy discussing what they should do.

Arguments. Heated discussions. Should they too go on hunger strike? Why not take food outside? Words, words, words poured out in an unceasing stream. They

seemed to talk tirelessly, with a new eagerness, because, for the first time, they were talking not about what they were *ordered* to do, but about what they would do on their own, or as a result of their own democratic discussion.

A few officers passed round. They wanted to make their presence felt. Nobody took any notice. No silence today; nor springing to attention. No, they were busy discussing and deciding.

Inevitably the conversation strayed to one topic—the tyranny of the officers and discrimination. Each recalled his personal experiences of humiliations suffered. They recalled the names of the white officers who had unjustly punished them, called them “black bastards”, “sons of coolies”, “sons of bitches”, “junglies” and so on.

They made lists of the most tyrannical officers who needed to be taught a lesson. Then they differed and argued again. Voices were raised and tempers frayed. Then they laughed again. Patted each other on the back and said:

“Alright, whatever it might be, there is to be no surrender this time. We must see the end of all this tyranny, we must drive these white officers out.”

Suddenly Lt. Commander Khan appeared on the scene. He looked for a moment at the men scattered in little groups, talking away for all they were worth. He looked on amazed for a few seconds. Indiscipline! This had to be stopped. He must tackle it carefully.

He pulled himself up and walked over to one of the groups. The conversation stopped. The ratings looked up at the officer. He started talking immediately and the boys listened quietly.

“You can come,” he said, “and tell me all your difficulties personally. You need not even bother about ‘proper channels’. And what is the use of this? Go back to work.”

It cut no ice. The ratings shouted all together: “We have heard that before! We have been complaining to you ever since we joined the service and you haven’t cared a damn about it! Now it is too late! We don’t want your help any longer! We shall improve our lot with our own hands, in our own way!”

Against this torrent of words Khan had nothing to say. He knew that the game was up. Quietly he walked away.

The others had now stopped talking. They too had heard the conversation. They cheered. One said:

"The fellow thinks he is very clever. He thought he could deceive us! Oh, no! It is too late. Poor fellow he doesn't realise that he is alone and we are so many."

We are so many. That was the prevailing thought in their minds. And they decided to go and join their many friends. Nobody could say from where the suggestion first came but it caught on and it was decided that they would go out for breakfast. After breakfast they would hold a meeting to discuss their course of action.

So out they went right into the streets. They entered the various restaurants. They were in a holiday mood, like schoolchildren set free for the first time from their strict teachers.

At *Castle Barracks* too everyone got up early. They were anxiously waiting for the morning newspapers. At 6 the paper came. They gathered round in silence as one read the headlines aloud:

"Indian Naval Men in City on Hunger Strike" "Insulting Behaviour of the CO Infuriates Ratings" "Authorities Get Panicky" "Communications between India Units and Abroad Dislocated" and so on.

By this time all the ratings gathered in the open. They cheered loudly. In loud tones they discussed what they should do.

"Let us go on hunger strike too," someone suggested.

"No. We shall go to the *Talwar* first. There we shall decide what we should do."

Proposal after proposal: Arguments and counter-arguments.

One rating suddenly mounted the trunk of a tree in the drill shed and began to address the ratings. His first few words were lost in the general hubbub. Gradually his voice began reaching the ears of the ratings. Soon some 300 gathered round. In a corner, here and there, little groups continued to argue.

"Just now we have read the news," the speaker was saying, "that our brothers in the *Talwar* have gone on hunger-strike. Their CO has called them 'sons of Indian bitches', 'sons of coolies'. This is not the first time in our lives that we have heard such things. Each one of us

present here has had these abuses hurled against him a number of times. But today our brothers in the *Talwar* have decided to fight. They refuse to tolerate any longer such insulting behaviour from any officer."

The men listened in silence. They nodded their heads in approval. They did not ask who had given him permission to speak, who had appointed him their spokesman, their leader. For they were all leaders and everyone had a right to speak. This was the first time that they could speak their minds.

As the speaker continued a rating brought a plate of dal and gave it to the speaker. He paused to look at it and continued:

"You have seen one of our brothers bringing in the dal that has been prepared for our breakfast. It's just what we have been eating ever since we joined the service—foul-smelling, half-cooked and full of stones and husks.

"Now we must put an end to this. Now is the time to follow our brothers in the *Talwar* and refuse to take this food."

The ratings cheered loudly.

"Now, at this very moment, let us declare to the authorities that we too are going on hunger-strike. After this meeting let us form a procession and go to the *Talwar* to tell them that we too have joined the battle."

The meeting broke up. "To the *Talwar*," they shouted as they went round the barracks, getting everyone together. Within a few minutes every one of the 3,000 ratings had joined the procession.

They marched towards the gates shouting slogans. Their young voices rent the air. "Inquilab Zindabad", "Hindu-Muslim Ek Ho", echoed and re-echoed. The slogans of the people had at last been taken over by the men in the Forces.

Commander Streatfield James, the CO of Castle Barracks, was just entering the establishment. He crept past the threatening crowd that thronged the gates. There was revenge in the eyes of the ratings and terror in his.

At the gate the sentries removed their belts and joined the procession as it marched out into the street.

As they reached the main street some ratings ran ahead and bought Congress and League flags. Placing them at the head of the procession they marched on.

The people looked on with wonder. Men gathered on

the pavements, women looked down from the windows, children stopped playing to stare with amazement. The Navy boys were marching in a procession with the Congress and League flags, shouting slogans.

"Congress-League Ek Ho!", "Inquilab Zindabad!"

Hundreds of civilians spontaneously joined the procession, shouting slogans.

The procession made its way towards Fort Barracks. Some of the ratings had commandeered the unit trucks and were driving them at the head of the procession. They too put up the Congress and League flags.

"We are working people," someone said, "we must put up the Red Flag as well!"

No sooner said than done. All the three flags went up at the head of the procession and on the trucks. Triumphant in the breeze fluttered the Charka, the Crescent, and the Hammer and Sickle.

As they reached Fort Barracks, the ratings poured out from the restaurants and, shouting slogans, greeted their comrades. The processionists asked them to join up.

"To the *Talwar*!" they cried.

Hurried consultations were held. The Fort Barracks ratings too decided to go to the *Talwar*. The meeting after breakfast was postponed.

The procession swelled and more flags came together. A few more trucks were picked up at the Fort Barracks.

Now they headed for Bori Bunder. On the way a white police sergeant tried to stop the procession. All pounced on him. He was beaten black and blue. His revolver was snatched away. He barely escaped with his life.

So they marched on, with their banners flying and shouting themselves hoarse. All along the road the people lined the streets and gazed with wonder at this grand spectacle of marching men. More and more joined the procession.

On Hornby Road* the ratings requested all to close their shops and support the struggle of the RIN ratings. The Indian shopkeepers promptly closed. Some were frightened, some wanted to join the procession, but they all

* Hornby Road : Now, Dadabhai Naoroji Road, main thoroughfare in Bombay's Fort area—centre of foreign and Indian big business and commercial establishments.

responded promptly to the appeal of the ratings. British shop-owners, however, contemptuously ignored their request. This angered the boys. In fury they rushed to the shop-windows and smashed them, breaking up everything.

For a time some of the ratings fell into the grip of racial fury. The burning hatred, born of years of humiliation, now got the better of them. Everything foreign became hateful to them, every symbol of foreign domination had to be attacked.

In front of the United States Information Library they hauled down the US flag and set fire to it. A mail van with the royal insignia stood on the roadside. Some of the ratings jumped on top of it, threw out the mail and set it on fire. A few Europeans were attacked and seriously injured.

They reached the *Talwar* at about 11:45 a.m. The *Talwar* had become a very busy place. Ratings were pouring in from everywhere. As they entered they heard someone speaking through a loudspeaker.

"All ratings are requested to march straight to the parade ground. All civilians are asked to remain calm and wait outside. They must not try to come inside."

The civilians obeyed. The ratings marched in. It was one mass of humanity. Men from all the establishments were there. The ratings from the ships had also come. They mixed and gathered together, each anxious to know the other's story.

At one place a rating from the *Punjab* was telling the story of their activities since the morning.

"At six we got up with the usual morning bells. We had planned everything last night. At 6:30 the fall-in was not sounded. The rating who was to sound the bugle had joined the strike."

The audience laughed.

"Then what happened?"

"We all gathered on our mess decks and discussed the next move. Now the officers came and ordered us to fall in. Two of our representatives boldly stepped out and told the First Lieutenant that we were all on strike.

"The officer did not know what to say. You should have seen his face. He quietly walked away. Of course he promptly went and reported the matter to the Captain.

"At about 8 a.m. we started our first action. The hated British flag had to be removed. All the ratings gathered

on the quarter-deck. One of us pulled down the flag, the rest were drawn up in lines as on parade. They cheered loudly, but nobody broke ranks. There was perfect discipline.

"Then the three flags went up, the Congress flag, the League flag and the Red flag. Everyone came to attention as this rating saluted the flags. Then there was a deafening roar of 'Inquilab Zindabad!' The officers looked on."

His audience cheered too. They nudged each other and expressed their admiration.

"Where did you get the flags?" someone asked.

"Oh, that was simple. We made them last night out of the signal flags."

Then they were impatient to hear more of the story.

"What happened next?"

"As soon as the flag hoisting ceremony was over, we left the ship and went over to the other ships lying in the harbour. In little groups we boarded each ship—the *Berar*, *Moti*, *Neelum*, *Jumna*, *Kumaon* and *Oudh*. Everywhere the ratings welcomed us with slogans. We pulled down the White Ensign and put up the three flags wherever we could.

"By this time the ratings of the other ships too were busy removing British flags and putting up national flags. The men poured out of the ships and joined us at the breakwater. Every ship had joined—the *Madras*, *Sind*, *Mahratta*, *Teer*, *Dhanaush* and *Assam*."

"What were the officers doing?" someone asked.

"Nothing. Only on the *Moti* was there some trouble. As we were removing the White Ensigns a British officer tried to stop us. The ratings pounced on him and he was removed. After that there was no difficulty."

"What about the other ships lying at anchor?"

"Don't be impatient, brother. I was coming that. We sent men in boats to some of those ships and also sent messages from the Deck Signal Station. In this way the White Ensign was removed from the *Narbada*, *Heera*, *Khyber*, *Clive*, *Lawrence* and others.

"Gradually they started coming ashore. By ten we were nearly 3,000 strong. Now we marched out through the gates of the Dockyard in an orderly procession, shouting slogans. Near the Bombay Electric Supply and Transport Office we were given a League Flag. Some time later we

got hold of a Congress flag. Then a tramway worker gave us a Red Flag. And with all these flags we came here.

"And do you know what we saw when we came here? The White Ensign was still proudly fluttering in the breeze! Without waiting for anybody we promptly pulled it down and destroyed it."

By this time more ratings had arrived. Their numbers had swelled to some 10,000. Discussions in groups were still continuing. Everywhere there was the atmosphere of a big festival.

At about 12:30 p.m. a meeting was called. All gathered round. One of the leaders of the *Talwar* Strike Committee spoke.

He narrated all the events that had led up to the strike and the ratings listened quietly. He told them that the FOB had wanted to meet their representatives. So they had elected fourteen men who were authorised to place their demands before the FOB. He suggested that they should all elect one representative from each ship or establishment to form a Central Strike Committee. It was agreed at the meeting that Castle Barracks should be allowed to send two representatives as their complement of men was far above the average.

Another strike leader from the *Talwar* then addressed the gathering.

"When we started the strike," he said, "we never thought that we would get such enthusiastic support from all our fellow ratings. We have received news that practically all the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy have joined in our struggle. We are all proud of our unity.

"I have just been told that when you were coming here in a procession some of you behaved very badly. I do not blame you for that. I know how we have suffered insults and humiliations. I know today it is a bit difficult for us to control our feelings. But we must not forget that our fight is a non-violent one.

"I request you to remain disciplined, to carry on your hunger-strike and not to give in till our demands are met. These are the demands we propose to place before the authorities today:

1. Release all political prisoners including those of the INA;

2. Take action against Commander King, CO of the *Talwar*, for using insulting language against the ratings;
3. Speedy demobilisation and provision for resettlement in peace-time employment;
4. Same scale of pay, allowances, etc. as those of RN ratings;
5. Access to NAAFI canteens;
6. Better food;
7. No return of clothing kit at the time of release; and
8. Withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia."

These demands were announced in the midst of wild cheers. The speaker then continued to explain these demands and appealed to the ratings not to take up arms. He also announced that they had approached Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali for her support and guidance and that she had promised to come there at four in the afternoon. He asked them to spread the news and muster in thousands at that meeting.

After him, rating after rating rose spontaneously to speak his heart and mind out. Some concretised the demands by quoting innumerable examples of discrimination, bad food, inadequate pay and so on.

It was past one when the meeting came to a close.

Most of the ratings now went back to their ships or barracks. Some however remained in the *Talwar* and went about in small groups exchanging their own experiences of the day's events.

Some trucks were sent out by the strike leaders to various parts of the city, to see that ratings on the streets remained calm. They carried the three flags with them and addressed small groups of citizens throughout the afternoon. They told them of their troubles, their sufferings, and appealed for their help in their struggle for a better existence.

At about 1:30 p.m. some journalists tried to enter the *Talwar*. The sentries at the main gate refused to let them enter. A rating on the street took them round to the Royal Gate, which was now called the Azad Gate. Here some ratings were sitting on the wall. They discussed among themselves and agreed to let the journalists see things for themselves. A ladder was let down and the journalists were allowed to climb into the *Talwar*.

Inside the *Talwar* they still found great excitement. A

large number of ratings were yet concentrated there. Standing in groups in the veranda of the barracks or sitting in the open, they were busy discussing excitedly.

At one corner could be seen a rating standing on a table and addressing a small crowd, most of whom were busy discussing instead of listening to the speaker.

By this time the sentries had been removed and a few civilians had also crept in and added to the confusion that seemed to prevail.

The journalists went round from group to group to find out what they were talking about. They had expected to hear complaints about food and other amenities; instead, to their surprise, all they heard were expressions of anti-British sentiment. A white officer passing by was sufficient provocation for them loudly to abuse them, sometimes in the language they had learnt from their officers, language which Commander King would have characterised as in the "normal naval manner".

The officers were busy negotiating terms of surrender. They could not fail to overhear the contemptuous terms that were flung at them but did not dare to stop near any such group.

As the journalists walked round the establishment they saw the words "Jai Hind" chalked up everywhere in bold capitals. It was indeed the expression of the seething discontent among the ratings.

At about two in the afternoon some more ratings arrived at the *Talwar*. These new arrivals created somewhat of a sensation. Within a few minutes a procession was planned and once more, with Congress, League and Red flags, the ratings marched out of the *Talwar*. This time the procession was orderly and disciplined.

Once more the streets rang with revolutionary slogans. The people gathered at street corners and greeted this body of disciplined men as they marched past, as only men of India's navy can. Going along the Colaba Causeway, they came to Flora Fountain, the centre of Bombay's business quarter, and returned to the *Talwar* along Back Bay.

In the meantime, the members of the *Talwar* Strike Committee had returned from their meetings with the national leaders and some officers. Some ratings who had been roaming round the city had also gathered there and a meeting started at about three. The members of the

Strike Committee reported their activities. More ratings began to pour in for the meeting at which Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali was expected to speak. About this time the procession also returned.

So the meeting began in right earnest. Speaker after speaker came up to address the gathering. One of the leaders stated that negotiations had begun and it was reported that FOB Rattray had been persuaded to give them a sympathetic hearing. He said that their demand for good food was the most essential. Going on to describe the food they had been getting he made certain concrete demands. He ended his speech with a vague attempt to link up the RIN strike with the freedom struggle and with a protest against the insults to Indian ratings. His last words were:

"We must not forget that ours is a non-violent struggle."

The speakers who followed him, rank-and-file ratings, were more militant. It was they who truly expressed the mood of the sailors. They were more outspoken in their condemnation of racial discrimination and ill-treatment. A torrent of hate and anger poured from the mouth of speaker after speaker. Every expression of anger against the British, every call for a fight to the finish, every appeal to the patriotic sentiments of the ratings got tremendous applause. The leaders looked on with surprise and a certain amount of fear. Even they could not properly measure the strength of the bitterness, the passion that they had let loose, the fire that they were handling. After years of suffering in silence the ratings had found their own tongue at last.

The men anxiously waited for Mrs. Asaf Ali. They knew that they had the support of the people but they wanted the help of their national leaders as well. They had read with eagerness their speeches, especially of people like Mrs. Asaf Ali and other heroes of the August struggle. Their call for the final struggle against British imperialism had sunk deep into their hearts. Where were the leaders to guide them on to the fight to the finish?

Suddenly Rattray arrived. He was met by some members of the Strike Committee. The others ignored him. There was a hum of whispers, but the speeches continued.

Rattray wanted to know what their grievances were. A spokesman of the Strike Committee presented him with a list of their demands. Today they had added another—the

removal of Captain Inigo-Jones, the new CO of the *Talwar*, who had replaced Commander King.

Rattray looked at the list of demands. He had nothing to offer. He was only playing for time. He promised to refer the matter to Naval Headquarters and inform them of the results. Quietly he went back.

But Aruna Asaf Ali had not arrived. The ratings were getting more and more impatient. They were tired of listening over and over again to the same words, the same ideas, the repetition of the same stories of torture, suffering, insult. They wanted to hear what the national leaders had to say.

They began to grumble and shout at their own strike leaders who had promised to bring Aruna Asaf Ali. They demanded an explanation. Finally, shortly after four, it was reported that Mrs. Asaf Ali could not come. It put an end to the grumbling, but there was great disappointment.

They, however, decided to continue their own meeting and discuss the situation as it stood at the end of the day. A member of the *Talwar* Strike Committee was called upon to make a report.

"The position is this," he said, "we have received a communication from the FOB. He agrees to accept the demands of the *Talwar* ratings only as far as better food is concerned. As for the rest of the demands, he was not prepared to consider them. The question of the other ships and establishments have also been completely ignored by the FOB.

"We ratings of the *Talwar* have decided to reject these proposals. We are going to carry on the fight till all the demands of all the ships and establishments are granted. But, remember, we must fight non-violently."

When the meeting was over the ratings gradually dispersed to their own ships and establishments. Some still lingered on to talk to the journalists. They were anxious to know what the people outside were saying. A rating walked to them with a copy of the *Evening News*. All pored over it. "Ratings Run Amok"—they read the headline. They were furious. Indignant protests came from every corner. They wanted an explanation from the journalists.

The pressmen were taken by surprise. They did not

know what to say. A clever one replied: "But you must know that it is an Anglo-Indian paper. It is natural for them to give such a headline."

But the ratings were not to be taken in so easily. A quiet voice asked: "Is the *Bombay Sentinel* an Anglo-Indian paper too? Its headline is no better!"

There was an embarrassed silence.

"You do not know," one of the ratings said, "what we have suffered. If you had you would not have been able to write such rubbish."

In a sad but dignified voice he continued to tell them stories of their life in the Navy. It was that same sad and bitter story of racial discrimination, ill-treatment by officers, bad food, uncomfortable barracks, lack of amenities, but it was a human story and the journalists listened in silence.

In between the other ratings interjected with angry abuse of their white officers. No one had a good word for them.

It was already dark when the rating finished his story. "No use abusing," he said. "Now the time has come for us to teach them a lesson. We shall use the little knowledge that they have given us, the training they have given us, against them. Remember the INA! We too shall teach them a lesson. But you must help us. Our people must come to our aid."

The journalists departed in silence. The rest of the ratings returned to the barracks. They had a lot to do and a lot of things to think out that night. The first day of the great struggle was over.

That night too, very few slept. Everyone was back by seven in the evening. Immediately, in every ship and establishment, the men gathered together to elect their own Strike Committees and representatives to the Central Strike Committee.

Then followed those interminable discussions. In Fort Barracks they discussed the importance of collecting arms. Should they try to collect arms and ammunition from other establishments? But then, would this not be going against their decision of non-violence? How could they forget that their leaders had repeatedly reminded them that they must remain non-violent.

It was all so confusing and they could not decide the issue. They wished some political leader had come and

guided them and told them what to do. Non-violence was all right, but what if the enemy attacked? What would they do then? Were they expected to remain non-violent even then? This was something which went against their grain. After all they were fighters. To them fighting meant handling weapons and hitting hard at the enemy. What sort of a fight was this where you could not use arms, where you could not hit the enemy even when he attacked you?

No, they could not understand. Till late at night the discussions continued. Then they decided to postpone the decision. Someone suggested that, after all, such a serious situation had not arisen where they had to think of armed resistance. This was not the time to take such a serious decision. In case an emergency arose they could call a meeting and take a majority decision. If it was decided to fight with arms, they could always arrange to get some from Castle Barracks.

In Castle Barracks too the ratings spent an exciting evening. Here there was not much of political discussion. They talked only of the day's events, of the friends they had met and of what the city folk had said. Some had taken food outside but others were hungry and decided to break open the "galley".

The men began to cook for themselves. The cooks were all present but nobody would ask them to cook. Were not they on strike too? They could not get firewood so they gathered together some charpoys and broke them up. They had enough fire to cook their own meals. Sitting round the fire they helped each other to cook their food. A few sang at the top of their voices, others talked in low whispers. For once they felt free from the senseless discipline imposed on them by their white masters, for once they were free to do just what they liked.

Some were tired and went off to sleep, but others remained awake to celebrate this first day of freedom. In the small hours of the morning ratings of HMIS *Hamla* came in a procession to Castle Barracks. Everyone rushed out to greet them. More slogan shouting, more speeches, more expressions of determination to continue to the fight.

"We are sure to win," said one amid loud cheers.

Chapter Three

THE BRITISH OFFENSIVE BEGINS

FEBRUARY 20. The excitement of the first day had worn a bit thin but there was an air of uncertainty everywhere. The *Talwar* was the hub of all activity and from every establishment and ship they began to concentrate there.

Fort Barracks. The men got up early as usual. Today there were no bugles to wake them. It was their own day. They were themselves in command.

Once again the morning started with arguments and discussions. The problem was food. Hunger-strike was all right, but how were they going to fight? Would they not become weak from starvation? But eating food in their own mess was a difficult decision to take but then, they had no other alternative. Eating outside was an expensive business. Their pay was so low that they could not afford it. The senior ratings were so few that they could not undertake to bear the expenses of the others.

So it was finally decided that they would cook food and eat it in their own mess. But would the cooks agree to cook the food? That was another problem. What about the strike? The cooks too were on strike. But they were persuaded. After all they were going to feed their comrades and keep them fighting-fit. Moreover, quite a number of the ratings volunteered to help them and they all set to work.

Breakfast over, they all dressed up in full uniform to go to the *Talwar*. In real naval style they marched out of their barracks, the three flags at the head. And they marched as if they were on ceremonial parade—the only difference was the flags at the head and the slogans that they shouted.

In threes they marched through the streets. One day's struggle had made them more disciplined. They had realised that their dignity had to be maintained. Out in the streets once again, the people cheered them as they swung along, on to the *Talwar*.

At *Castle Barracks* too the ratings woke up early. They had a quick breakfast. Some of them immediately set off with their representatives for the *Talwar*. Others put on their civilian clothes and went to meet their friends. At the gate sat the Officer of the Day. But who cared? They boldly walked past him as he silently looked on. By 8:30 a.m. *Castle Barracks* was empty.

The Talwar. From the early hours of the morning the ratings from other establishments and from the ships had started pouring in. There were quite a few new faces. Some representatives from *HMIS Gondwana* also arrived. There was the same air of busy activity everywhere.

While they were waiting for the rest to arrive and the meeting to start they gathered round the representatives from the *Gondwana* and wanted to know what story they had to tell.

"Where were you yesterday?" someone asked.

"We could not come out," one of the ratings replied. "I shall tell you what happened though."

He then went on to recount how they first received the news of the strike at the *Talwar* on the evening of the 18th and how they spent an anxious, sleepless night, not knowing exactly what to do.

"Yesterday morning we heard the full news of the strike from the ratings of the *Punjab*. So we too decided to stop work. Word was sent round to everyone and within ten minutes all work ceased.

"You know we have an Indian Captain, Lt. Commander Rashid. As soon as he learnt that we were on strike he rushed over to us demanding that we get back to work. He did not speak politely either, but in the usual way. Of course we ignored him and that made him furious. He thundered at us that we had better be prepared for the consequences.

"We were rather surprised. We had never expected Lt. Commander Rashid to come and speak to us. He has

been seven months with us and this is the first time he came and spoke to us. But we realised one thing: our action had scared him. His sudden appearance and talk gave us confidence that if we stuck together we could win our demands.

"Now, when we all struck work, the cooks refused to cook any meals for us. They too were on strike. We had to spend a long time convincing them that they must cook for us. They quite rightly asked why, when everyone was on strike, they should work. We patiently explained to them that by cooking for the strikers they would be helping us and not the authorities, by keeping us well-fed they would be helping us to keep fighting-fit.

"We put the problem very bluntly. Supposing we had to take up arms to fight, we said to them. If we were starving how could we be expected to fight? That seemed to make sense to them.

"So the cooks went into a conference and agreed to our proposal. One of them came to us and said: '*Ham ek sharat par razi hote hain ki agar waqt aye to hamen bhi tum hatiyar doge aur ladne se nahin rokoge.*'*

"We assured them that if the time came they would also be armed and given a chance to fight."

The audience expressed their admiration for the cooks. After all they were supposed to be non-combatants and yet they were so keen to fight.

"Now nobody can beat us," they said. "Look at the spirit of our men. This is the spirit that wins wars."

"Well," continued the speaker, "they were so pleased that they began to discuss what arms they could handle and how efficiently."

After a pause he said: "You see we had spent the whole day getting things straight. We did not know what had been happening elsewhere so we decided to come out and find out everything. Some of us have also gone to the various ships."

The other ratings soon put their friends from the *Gondwana* in the picture and gave them the news up to date.

In the meantime, ratings who were coming in batches

* "We agree on one condition: if the time comes, you will give us arms and not stop us from fighting."

and in processions to the *Talwar* stopped at the Oval to hold a meeting. By this time there were quite a few thousands there. Today a new consciousness seemed to have come to them. They had realised that they must be disciplined.

Speaker after speaker deplored the previous day's acts of indiscipline and publicly apologised for the burning of the American flag.

From here they marched on to the *Talwar*. It was about ten when they arrived there. Thousands of voices rent the air with slogans.

The meeting started immediately. There was more discipline and order than on the previous day. A rating stood up to sing a song of Iqbal's about the poor and the down-trodden. It was a call to them to rise and fight their oppressors.

The President of the *Talwar* Strike Committee then addressed the meeting. Iqbal's song seemed to have set the tone of the speeches. Today there was more militancy, more determination.

The President began: "We will carry on our fight till our demands are fulfilled. We must stand firm on our own legs and maintain our unity. We must keep together all sections of the ratings."

A member of the newly-formed Naval Central Strike Committee then stood up.

"Our struggle", he said, "is against British imperialism. During the last six years of the war all the British officers have treated us like dogs, not like human beings. We have not merely to fight for our own demands but have also to join the bigger battle for the independence of our country. For this we must demand the release of all INA prisoners."

Another rating: "Ours is a difficult battle. But it does not mean that we shall give up our fight. No! We have got to carry on our fight till the last. We must remember one thing: that we must never surrender to the British bosses.

"We have shown our courage in battle on the high seas. Now the time has come for us to show our courage and ability to these white Naval officers. We know how to suffer hardships and to fight better than these white dogs. We may not get anything out of this fight but we must not surrender. We must give our lives, if need be, in the cause of freedom, but not serve as British slaves."

"Inquilab Zindabad!" shouted the ratings. "No surrender!"

In the midst of wild cheers the members of the NCSC left to hold their first meeting. The speeches continued on the parade ground.

A number of newspaper reporters who had been attending this meeting now followed the strike leaders and wanted to attend their meeting. They were all allowed to attend, except the reporter of *The Times of India* whom it was unanimously decided to exclude. The leaders told this reporter that they took serious objection to the manner in which their story had been presented in his paper. He explained that he had had nothing to do with the previous day's reporting and apologised on behalf of his paper, assuring them that he would make sure that this time no insulting remarks would be made. This seemed to satisfy the ratings and he was allowed to attend the meeting.

It was about 11 a.m. when the historic first meeting of the NCSC started in one of the classrooms of the *Talwar*. About forty-five representatives were present.

The first task was to elect the President of the Strike Committee. Mr. M. S. Khan was unanimously elected.

Next, four members were elected to form the Negotiating Committee. It was explained that the main task of this Committee would be to carry on negotiations for the fulfilment of the demands with the Naval authorities and the Government. The members of the Committee were authorised to meet the leaders of the various political parties and to try to get their support in this struggle.

The charter of demands was next discussed. Speaker after speaker spoke on these demands and concretised the issues by quoting various examples of ill-treatment by officers, delay in demobilisation, inadequacy of pay and allowances, bad food and so on.

Quite a few speakers emphasised the importance of the political demands. One of them said: "Release of the INA prisoners is a very important demand. The British have no right to try them. We must stand behind our brothers. We must demand the withdrawal of all INA cases."

Another rose to support the demand for withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia. "While we are fighting here," he said, "for our own independence, against the white sahibs, they are using our brothers to fight against

the Indonesians. Therefore we must insist on the withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia. If we do not do that we shall be failing in our duty towards our Indonesian brothers who are fighting for independence just like us."

The speech was greeted with applause and the demands were all approved. It was reported that the Flag Officer Commanding the RIN, Vice-Admiral Godfrey, had arrived in Bombay by air from Delhi. The Negotiating Committee was therefore authorised to place these demands before the FOCRIN.

Suddenly an Indian officer, a Lieutenant, entered the room. There was a suspicious silence. Everyone looked at him, hostility in his eyes. No officer was wanted here. It was a meeting of the ratings to mould their own fate with their own hands.

But the Lieutenant paused only a few seconds to look at the astounded groups of ratings and promptly began to address them. "I have come to join you," he said.

There were smiles of contemptuous disbelief on the faces of his audience. But the speaker continued: "I know you don't believe me. I know that you are thinking that I have come here to spy on you. But let me assure you that I have not come here with any such dirty purpose. I have come to join you because I consider your struggle to be a freedom struggle, a struggle against the British. To assure you and as a mark of my honesty I remove my badges of rank."

Dramatically he tore off his badges of rank. Spontaneously the ratings cheered.

"Now I am one of you," he continued. "You know that our fight is against the British and for this we have to remember that we have got to observe discipline. You must elect a leader to guide you. Select anyone you like and maintain discipline. Even the INA had their own officers to maintain discipline. As fighters you know well that you need such a person for this job and I offer myself for this work."

After a pause, while the ratings gazed at him with an expression of suspicion and wonder, he started again.

"Just before joining you, my friends and colleagues requested me not to come. I told them that I had made up my mind and that I thought that this was the time when something could be achieved. They warned me that you

would have no faith in me. I said to them that I was sure that you would listen to me when I appealed to you. I hope you will accept me as a fellow-fighter in the freedom fight."

He stopped. There was a slight pause. Then the ratings burst into loud applause. One got up and said:

"We welcome you amongst us. But we can't elect you as a leader to guide us. We have already formed a Central Strike Committee to guide our activities."

This seemed to damp the enthusiasm of the officer but he agreed and thanked the ratings.

The meeting resumed its business after this short and dramatic interruption. It was reported by one of the members that the workers and students of Bombay were planning to come out on a sympathetic strike. The enthusiastic support of the people of Bombay was noted with thanks.

It was decided that unless an emergency arose the NCSC would meet again at 10 a.m. on the following day. In the meantime the Negotiating Committee would proceed with their negotiations.

The first sitting of the NCSC came to an end at 12 noon.

Outside, the meeting still continued amidst frequent cheers and eager shouting of slogans. From the house-tops in the neighbourhood thousands of people watched the proceedings with interest. Every balcony, every window was full of men, women and children. They cheered with the ratings, shouted slogans and expressed their solidarity.

At about one in the afternoon about 3,500 ratings from HMIS *Akbar*, a shore establishment at Thana, a suburb of Bombay, marched in. The *Talwar* Strike Committee had tried to contact them the previous day but had been sent back by the guards at the gate of the establishment. And here they all were at last in defiance of all the obstacles placed before them by the authorities.

The *Akbar* had a tradition of 'trouble'. It was probably the worst administered establishment in the whole of the RIN. Corruption of various kinds seemed to flourish there. Only as recently as in 1944 the Hindu and Muslim ratings together had struck work because the Muslim ratings were not given time to say their prayers. As a result, some 200 had been dismissed.

But the spirit of revolt could not be crushed.

It was only on the 19th that the news of the strike reached the *Akbar*. For about two hours there was wild excitement all over the establishment. Work virtually stopped.

At about 12:30 p.m. the authorities decided to step in. A general parade was called. One of the officers addressed the parade and told them the details of the strike at Bombay. He emphasised the fact that the ratings of the *Akbar*, however, had nothing to do with this strike. He warned them that any act of indiscipline would be severely dealt with.

The ratings had been listening to him patiently but this threat enraged them. They were furious. The urge to do something had been already growing and now there was no stopping them.

It was a difficult decision to take. Their action had to be planned but they could not make up their minds how to proceed. They went back to work with heavy hearts and full of bitterness.

That night, in every barrack, small batches of men discussed the situation. There was still a lot of confusion and inability to grasp the whole situation. If only someone could contact the Bombay strike leaders. If only they could properly understand what was happening and make their own decisions.

It was just past nine. Confusion still prevailed. Suddenly a sentry from the gate rushed in to tell them that some members of the *Talwar* Strike Committee had come to see them and had been sent back by the CO.

That seemed to be exactly what they had been waiting for. Their comrades wanted their help. The CO had prevented them from meeting their brothers. It was an insult. Revenge must be taken. The issue was decided. They too would go on strike, they too would come out the next day.

Now for the planning. Throughout the sleepless night the ratings planned their programme of action. Anxiously they waited for the fateful dawn.

Early next morning not a single rating took breakfast. The officers were panicky and came round to persuade them to have their food but not a single rating would yield.

It was a surprise to the ratings themselves. They had never expected such success. But this expression of unbreakable unity gave them courage and confidence. They

were proud of their unity, their new found strength. They felt confident that nobody could crush them now. Their unity and their determination would give them the strength to fight against all odds.

But what next? They must go to the *Talwar*. They must join their brethren. So at 9 a.m. 2000 of them set out for Bombay. Very soon all the others joined up. They assembled on the parade ground and asked the authorities to provide them with transport to go to Thana station.

They had five miles to go, and they were anxious to get to the *Talwar* as soon as possible. The authorities however refused to give them any transport.

Some of the ratings immediately emptied some of the lorries and took them out but the others were undecided. Suddenly news came that HMIS *Cheetah* at Trombay had been surrounded by the military. That put new courage into them, a fresh urge to fight.

Within a few minutes the calm order of the men broke into frenzy. They rushed to the Guard Room, broke open the cells, released the prisoners and set fire to this symbol of tyranny. For a few minutes there was wanton destruction.

Some Indian officers now addressed them and asked them not to misbehave in this fashion. They listened to the officers but when they were asked not to go to Bombay and threatened with arrest if they attempted to go they were furious again. They immediately decided to walk, all the way if necessary.

So the procession started. They marched out of the gates towards the station. A few ratings brought Congress, League and Red flags, placed them at the head of the procession and led the march.

The whole of Thana was astir as the ratings entered the town, shouting slogans, "Hindustan azad", "Release INA prisoners", "Fulfil our demands", "Hindu-Muslim ek ho", "Down with British imperialism", "Inquilab zindabad", and so on. The citizens going about their daily business stopped to look at this strange and welcome sight. Gathered in knots they discussed this new upsurge among servicemen.

They welcomed the procession with cheers and responded to their slogans. Some whispered: "Now the British are doomed! Why, we used to call them mercenary only the

other day and now they have come over to us. The game is up."

On the ratings marched. What were five miles with freedom at stake!

At the station they divided themselves into two groups, one to go to Victoria Terminus and the other to Churchgate Station. As they boarded the trains the people willingly made room for them. The compartments rang with their voices shouting the freedom slogans of the people.

They told their fellow passengers the story of their sufferings, the story of the battle they were waging. The people listened with wonder and anger. They forgot their work and joined these fighters and went with them to the *Talwar*. The fight was on. It was freedom's battle. How could they stay away?

It was about noon when they reached Bombay. Immediately they organised themselves into two processions and finally reached the *Talwar* at 1 p.m.

Here a special meeting was held to welcome them. They told the audience the story of their battle. A member of the NCSC welcomed them and gave the audience a summary of the proceedings of the NCSC meeting. He announced to the ratings that negotiations were going on between the FOC-RIN and the Negotiating Committee.

This announcement was very welcome to the ratings. They were in a fighting mood, for it was just then that they had heard the order of the FOCRIN that all ratings must return to their ships and establishments by 3:30 p.m. Anyone found on the streets after that hour would be arrested.

The ratings were furious but a representative of the NCSC asked them to go back to their own establishments and ships.

"On behalf of the Naval Central Strike Committee," he said, "I appeal to you to go back. Do not give the authorities a chance to put us in the wrong. Leave the whole matter in the hands of the leaders you have elected. Remain calm, disciplined, united and non-violent."

But the ratings were furious. The meeting was over. They had little more than an hour left in which to go back to their own ships and establishments. But still they lingered on and discussed this offensive of the hated white authorities.

"They talk of negotiations and threaten us at the same

time," someone said. "This is a trick. We should give them a time limit and then take up arms. We must fight back their offensive."

"Why should we go back?" said another. "The FOC-RIN's order is a challenge to us. We should fight back. We must not yield. If we yield now, we shall never be able to fight back when the time comes."

Thus they argued. The simple ratings, who knew no politics, but knew well the art of war, could not accept the decision to retreat before the offensive of the enemy. It was not done. But most of them decided to abide by the decision of their leaders. After all they were disciplined fighters.

Sadly but silently, one by one, they dispersed. A few remained behind. They wanted to be on the spot and see what happened.

On the other side, the British were busy preparing for an offensive in right earnest. Military guards had already been posted in many places. They were outside the *Talwar*, the Dockyards and Castle Barracks. They had already started patrolling the streets.

Within a few minutes the whole atmosphere had changed. Once again there was confusion in the minds of the ratings, and anger. There was a feeling that the hour of the final battle was drawing close.

By 3 p.m. most of the ratings returned to their own ships and establishments. Only a few remained behind. Exactly at 3:30 the military police trucks started picking them up and bringing them to the *Talwar*. But they were not arrested. The British offensive had begun, but they were still not sure of their ground and were proceeding cautiously. They were afraid that the ratings would hit back and they did not feel too sure of their strength against the united counter-offensive of the people and the ratings.

Both sides awaited developments during the night.

Chapter Four

ON THE EVE OF THE BATTLE

THE Naval Central Strike Committee seemed somewhat bewildered by the sudden turn of events. They decided to take up the matter with the authorities.

Very soon news began to pour in from different establishments of the arrival of military guards. At 3 : 30 Maratha guards had already surrounded Castle Barracks. The men were cut off from the outside world. They were virtually prisoners. It was the same everywhere.

The NCSC issued the following statement:

"It has been brought to the notice of the Committee that the ratings who are on strike in all establishments and ships are perturbed and annoyed over the action of the authorities in calling Indian Army personnel and armed police to guard and surround their barracks and ships. The Committee feels that the action of the authorities is provocative and totally unwarranted. Very naturally fears have been aroused in the minds of the ratings that this is an attempt to isolate them and prevent them from having any access to food from outside, when food inside is impossible to obtain or consists of things not fit for eating.

"While the Committee feels that it will do everything in its power to impress upon the authorities the need to immediately withdraw the armed guards, it strongly appeals to the comrades wherever they may be to maintain complete calm and solidarity and refuse to be stampeded into any kind of violent action on their part. It appeals to all comrades to remain non-violent and disciplined under the gravest provocation or even upon being done violence to."

The statement was released to the press and sent by signal to all ships and establishments.

The members of the Negotiating Committee, led by Khan, then proceeded to the FOB's bungalow to meet the FOCRIN and discussed the terms of settlement with him.

Castle Barracks. The sight of the armed guards made the ratings furious. The offensive must be fought back. Why not break open the armoury and start fighting now? It was with great difficulty that the leading ratings persuaded the others to wait for instructions from the NCSC. After all they were fighting a joint battle. Sporadic actions would only help the enemy. Whatever they did they had to do it together.

This argument made sense to them but they decided to place their own guards over the arms and ammunition. All weapons and ammunition were removed from the armoury and placed under their own sentries. Every possible position from which an attack could come was guarded.

Fort Barracks. As soon as the ratings returned, they began to pack their kit. There was no point in remaining at Fort Barracks. They had no arms there. The battle would begin at any moment. They too must go and join their brothers in Castle Barracks where there was enough ammunition and they could also usefully serve as good reinforcements.

But others argued that they should remain where they were. They could act as a useful reserve, in case fighting broke out, by going out in civilian clothes and getting civilian help. This argument appealed to many and they decided to remain behind.

By this time Maratha guards had been posted at both the gates of the establishment. The ratings were angry but some of them spoke to the guards and found them quite sympathetic. They discovered more. The Marathas had not been told that they were being brought out to fight against their brothers in revolt. They had been told that a Hindu-Muslim conflict had broken out and that they were required to suppress the trouble. But now they were put wise and said that not one of them was going to fight against his own brothers.

This conversation with the Maratha soldiers calmed the ratings considerably. They thought that, after all, it was a great joke. The soldiers were with them and there could be no trouble. So they got busy with their own jobs.

HMIS Gondwana. The ratings from outside had come back with the news of the latest developments. This gave rise to various discussions. Once more the battle of arguments and counter-arguments started. Unused to political struggles of any sort, they began to discuss the fundamentals. Violence versus non-violence; armed resistance versus peaceful protest.

Fight back the enemy: if you do not get him he will get you. This was the lesson that they had learned during the six years of war. It had stood them in good stead all these days. But now it all seemed different. But was it really so different? Were not the British the enemy? Were they not gathering their forces? How could they keep quiet? If they did not hit back now, they themselves would be slaughtered. After all this was war.

And so they argued for hours. On the practice of non-violence they differed, but on one point they agreed. There could be no ignoble surrender. If the British attacked they would have to be fought back with arms. To pacify the protagonists of non-violence it was agreed that before taking to arms a warning would be given to the enemy asking him to clear out.

Once this was decided, they began to work with clock-work efficiency. A list of arms and ammunition was prepared. The officers had already abandoned the ship and everything was in the hands of the ratings. The weapons were not many, but sufficient to carry on for some time. They had 4" guns, medium machine-guns, rifles, revolvers, grenades and depth-charges. All the weapons and ammunition were ready for use as they had been recently prepared for training purposes.

An emergency programme was next chalked out. The tasks were allotted, orders were given and battle positions chosen. A watch was appointed for the night with orders to keep a look-out for ship movements during the night.

Yes. It was preparations for battle. In every establishment keep a look-out for ship movements during the night.

Meanwhile, in the FOB's bungalow, the negotiations

continued. One of the ratings demanded: "The military guards must immediately be removed otherwise we shall not be able to check the anger of the ratings. We refuse to be held responsible for the consequences."

But Godfrey refused to remove the guards. He knew that he had won the first round. The ratings had taken his first offensive lying down. They had not resisted. Now he could break them.

"No," he said, "I cannot remove the guards. It is up to GHQ to remove them. I cannot recommend it now. Of course, if you give me an undertaking to surrender and go back to work unconditionally we might remove the military guards."

For a long time they argued but Godfrey and Rattray were firm.

The demands of the strikers were discussed. The authorities refused to consider anything but the demands about food. They discussed in detail the requirements and agreed to meet most of them. They promised to provide eggs, butter, fresh fruit and so on. They promised to send them rations according to the new scale that night and suggested that now the strike should be called off.

It was after one-and-a-half-hour's discussion that the Negotiating Committee members returned to the *Talwar*.

The strike leaders were now afraid that, on the basis of these concessions, the authorities would try to disrupt the unity of the ratings, spread false propaganda and break the strike. Accordingly they sent a signal to all ships and establishments.

To:
All Ships and Establishments.

From:
N. S. C.

False rumours are being made by the naval authorities to break up our organisation, through some ratings. Do not listen to any propaganda until you are informed by DSS. Mind that you are under NSC. And NSC will instruct you through DSS. Please keep complete calm, peace and non-violence until further orders.

20/2.

There were still quite a few ratings at the *Talwar*. The members of the Negotiating Committee reported to them

about their conversations with the FOCRIN. Nobody seemed satisfied. The general feeling was that a final battle was imminent.

The ratings now wanted to get back to their ships and establishments to prepare for this final battle. The military guards at the gate were contacted and they agreed to take the men to Castle Barracks. The members of the Negotiating Committee and the few other members of the NCSC who were present hurriedly got together to review the situation and plan the next phase of the struggle. It was a momentous meeting. On one side was the British offensive, on the other was the news that they had just received: that the strike had spread all over India, even to the ships on the high seas and in remote ports.

It was in such an atmosphere that they met. It was something like the meeting of a war council. The situation was serious. Food and water supplies were running short. In shore establishments the taps might be cut off any moment. Castle Barracks was badly off as regards food. About ammunition they did not care to discuss. They vainly hoped that everything would be over and an actual armed conflict would not be necessary. The national leaders must come to their aid and prevent useless bloodshed.

For an hour they discussed the situation and made plans to improve the food and water situation. It was decided that even if the FOCRIN kept his promise and issued rations during the night according to the new scale, those should not be touched unless it was certain that every ship and establishment had received such a supply. Instructions were accordingly signalled to all ships and establishments telling them of this decision of the NCSC.

But the men had to be fed. They were told to use dry rations as far as possible. Those who had sufficient rations were asked to share them with those who were deficient like those in Castle Barracks. The Dockyards were asked to supply water to the rest.

The meeting came to an end at 10 p.m. The members of the Committee dispersed.

At Castle Barracks, in the meantime, arrived all the stray ratings who had remained behind at the *Talwar*. Some sixty ratings from the RIN Detention Quarters at Sewri had also arrived. There were now some 5,000 to 6,000 ratings at Castle Barracks.

While they were busy discussing their future plans, an officer suddenly entered the barracks. Without much ceremony he delivered a short speech.

"I have come to tell you," he said, "that the Naval authorities have kindly agreed to grant your food demands immediately. About your other demands, they will be considered shortly. In view of the fact that your trouble over food is your main grievance the authorities have agreed to provide you with jam, butter, eggs, fresh fruit and other items mentioned by your representatives.

"Considering the fact that your main demand has been met, you should now give up the strike. You should do nothing to spoil the good name of the Royal Indian Navy. Actually your new rations will be here shortly."

The ratings did not deign to reply to this appeal. After a short, embarrassed silence he left. Shortly after, a truck-load of food did arrive. But the ratings had received their instructions from the NCSC and refused to touch the food.

About this time, final instructions arrived from the *Talwar* warning them about the plans for the next morning:

TO RIN STRIKERS:

We recall an incident which happened in RIN M.T. Establishment in RIN Dockyards, Bombay, in 1944. The ratings who struck work then were confined to barracks with armed guards outside. That is what has already happened in our present case.

In 1944 the MT barracks' ratings were compelled by physical force to sign a declaration that each one is not prepared to work any more, and finally 164 persons were sent behind the bars.

But this time we have informed the FOB to withdraw the military guards or else we go on complete hunger-strike from 7:30 in the morning.

Having these facts in mind we hope that the authorities will be sensible enough to handle the situation without the least violence on their side.

We like to recall that these are the same hands that handled the situation in 1944—and the means!

The following programme has been decided for tomorrow:

1. Wait for information from the *Talwar* if the military guard is withdrawn.
2. If you do not get the desired news go on a lying down hunger-strike from 7:30 in the morning.
3. No violence in words or deeds to be committed.
4. The hunger-strike will go on till the military is withdrawn.
5. No rumours to be believed unless confirmed by the NSC.

It was on the basis of this that the men sat down together to plan their programme for the next day.

While some were busy planning, the others gathered round the men who had come from the RIN Detention Quarters to listen to their story of the battle.

It was only on the morning of February 19, when four ratings came to Bombay to collect rations, that they discovered that the RIN ratings were on strike. Two of them went to the *Talwar* to get the full details and the others returned without rations to Sewri.

The news spread like wild fire among the ratings in the Detention Quarters. But they did not know what to do. The CPOs and POs, nearly equal in number to the ratings, were very hostile. They could not go and ask them what to do. So they were in a fix with nobody to guide them. The whole day passed in deliberations and when the ratings returned from the *Talwar* it was finally decided that they would refuse duty that night.

No rating turned up at Night Watch. Promptly the Commanding Officer together with other officers and the Master-at-Arms came over to the ratings and asked them to remain loyal.

"What do you want?" he asked. "Have you any troubles? I am here to redress your grievances. Tell me what you want and you can have it."

This appeal had no effect. The ratings refused to listen to him and maintained a sulky silence. When kind words and persuasion failed the officers tried threats. For hours the negotiations continued. The more the officers pleaded, the more they threatened and fretted and fumed, the more firmly did the ratings refuse to do any work. The officers retired at midnight without having achieved anything.

During the night the men got together and made plans for the following day. They realised that they were too weak inside the barracks to put up an effective resistance so they decided to go to Bombay. They could not make any plan but decided that something would have to be done at the spur of the moment next morning.

In the morning there was a fall-in rather early. The authorities were determined to use force to make the boys fall in. To their surprise the men quietly came on parade. As they came near the jetty they made a rush for the boats. But they could not take out the boats without the help of the Mechanical Engineer who knew how to handle them. He was held back by the CO. So their first bid for freedom was foiled.

Having defied authority once, they now became more bold. They pulled down the Union Jack and set fire to it, they began shouting anti-British slogans, their wild outbursts forced the officers to withdraw and finally they managed to get hold of boats to go to Bombay. By evening they managed to reach Castle Barracks.

Thus they spent the night. Some went off to sleep, some talked over the day's events, some discussed the plans for the next day. But everywhere there was a feeling of tension. It was a night of anxious waiting. Just one simple action of the authorities had suddenly turned the scales. The seriousness of their battle at last began to dawn upon them. A feeling of inexperience gnawed at their hearts. If only the national leaders would come to their help. But, whatever happened, they were determined to fight on till the last. These were the thoughts which oppressed them that fateful night.

Chapter Five

IN DEFENCE OF FREEDOM

FEBRUARY 21. The fateful day dawned. The night had passed quietly. The morning too seemed pleasant and peaceful. By 7:30 the ships poured out their load of ratings on the dockyard. After a night of tense expectation and anxiety there was now a sense of relief. The boys sang and shouted and greeted the peaceful morning with revolutionary slogans.

At *Fort Barracks* the ratings gathered in the gymnasium after breakfast to plan their programme for the day. There followed the usual clash of ideas and suggestions and speeches expressing the determination to continue the struggle against all odds.

Suddenly a rating broke into the meeting from outside. He rushed to the platform and cried:

"They are shooting down our brothers at *Castle Barracks*. We must go to their help."

It took them some time to realise what had happened. There was a sudden silence. Then the fury burst forth. So the enemy had struck. Yes. They must rush to the side of their brothers. Why waste time in useless discussion? There was no time for words. It was time for action.

Thus argued some of the ratings. They wanted to rush off to *Castle Barracks* at once. The more sober, however, tried to pacify them. How could they help by going to *Castle Barracks*? They would not be able to get there. They would be shot on the way. Even if they did manage to get there, what could they do? They had no arms.

That was all right. But they could not sit quietly and see their brothers butchered. They had to do something. The younger ratings were getting more and more desperate.

From the distance the sound of firing poured into their ears and stirred them to action.

Finally a unanimous decision was reached. The papers had published an appeal by the Bombay Students' Union calling for a general strike in sympathy with the ratings on the following day. The best thing that the ratings could do was to slip out into the city in civilian clothes and appeal to the people to come to their aid by joining battle against the common enemy.

This suggestion appealed to most of the ratings. It was agreed that they would meet in the evening to review the situation. Two of them immediately set out for Castle Barracks to find out what was happening. In civilian clothes, slipping past the friendly sentries was an easy job.

At the Dockyard too the early morning gaiety was brought to a sudden end by the sound of firing from the direction of Castle Barracks. It was about 9 a.m. A horrified silence fell over the crowd as the first piercing sound of rifle and machine-gun fire penetrated the hum of voices. Like one man they turned round anxiously towards Castle Barracks.

They looked across the water. With the massive Town Hall and a cluster of houses forming the background stood a young signaller on the roof of Castle Barracks. He was sending a message to them. It said that British troops were attacking them from all sides and that they were replying: bullets with bullets.

The message was immediately passed on to the DSS who relayed it to all ships and establishments.

The other ratings immediately dispersed to their ships. There was a lot to be done. In every ship it was the same. The ratings broke open the magazine, collected whatever arms and ammunition they could, got into their battle equipment and took up positions in the ships. In the dockyards too, battle positions were occupied. Within an hour, the whole place was empty and an ominous calm had descended over the area. From their positions, the ratings watched with growing concern and impatience the truckloads of British troops moving towards Castle Barracks.

Castle Barracks. Early in the morning it was all calm and quiet. Someone said that the entire Fort area had been

flooded with British troops. To verify the report, some of the ratings climbed on the roof and had a look round. They saw that many British soldiers had been concentrated in the Town Hall. It seemed that the next round of the offensive was about to begin.

In a few minutes the news went round to every rating. In great excitement they began to gather together. Something had to be done. Now there were no discussions about violence and non-violence. The issue was straight and simple. The enemy was preparing an offensive, they must be prepared to fight back.

Some ratings went to the Master-at-Arms' office, just over the main gate, and began to address the Maratha guards who were stationed there.

"You are Indians," one of the ratings said, "and we are Indians. You must not fight against us. You know that we are not fighting only for ourselves but for you as well."

For a few minutes the Maratha sepoys were silent, one of them quietly came close to the wall and in a low voice said: "Well, we have to carry out our orders you know. But rest assured we shall not fire at you. We have kept only blank ammunition with us."

The ratings were assured. They laughed at the trick.

But only a few minutes after this the attack began. A few shots were heard. The ratings rushed out into the open. They saw the Maratha soldiers trying to enter the gates.

The ratings rushed to the Guard Room and took up arms. Within a few minutes they were all in battle positions. This sudden preparedness of the ratings frightened the white officers commanding the Maratha guards. They ordered the sepoys to retire. They had no knowledge of what arms and ammunition the ratings possessed but they knew that they were many in number and a determined body of men.

Now that the soldiers had been withdrawn the ratings began to equip themselves properly and get ready for all emergencies. The arms which had been haphazardly collected were properly distributed among those who could best use them. It was surprising to see the discipline of the ratings. There were no arguments. The leading ratings were unquestioningly obeyed. Today they were all disciplined soldiers fighting for their freedom, for their very

existence; fighting against an enemy who was better armed and had all facilities at his disposal.

The prison cells were now broken open and all the prisoners released. They were asked to maintain strict discipline and carry on the fight. When the white army officers at the gate saw that the cells had been opened and the prisoners let off, they fired again. The ratings fired back to show that they were prepared to take up the challenge.

The ratings then took up defensive positions all round Castle Barracks. More arms were required for the fight which now seemed inevitable. Another magazine was broken open and more weapons were collected. This time they secured medium machine-guns with bolted ammunition.

The machine-guns were promptly distributed in strategic positions. One was mounted near the Captain's cabin facing the sea. The second they placed near the hospital, also facing the sea. The third was found to be defective and was abandoned. The seamen were called and arms were distributed. Some were given rifles, some revolvers and others only hand grenades. They were thus despatched to their posts.

On the army side too there was a lot of activity. They too were manoeuvring for position. They wanted to attack the Barracks or at least neutralise some of its fire-power. Some of the military were reported concentrating in the area of the Drafting Reserve Barracks, where the gun-mountings were. Four ratings were immediately despatched there, armed with rifles with fixed bayonets and a few hand grenades.

Another group was allotted the task of guarding the main entrance from the top of the Master-at-Arms' office. Others got on to the terrace to prevent troops from climbing trees and coming inside over the terrace. The rest were sent to various positions all along the seaside.

By this time the military officers had realised that Maratha troops could not be used. Actually they had refused to fire against their own brothers in the Navy. British troops were brought over to replace them. They began to fire at the men guarding the gates.

The battle began in right earnest. A Naval officer standing on the balcony of the Reserve Bank of India building

seemed to be acting as an observer and directing operations. He was thrown off his perch by a single bullet. Another soldier standing at the gate of the building was also shot at and brought down.

By this time a large number of British troops had gathered round Castle Barracks. They were making preparations to attack from all sides and force an entry. A soldier was seen climbing a tree to get on to the roof. He was brought down by a bullet. The ratings on the terrace decided to clear the area to prevent further attempts. A couple of hand grenades flung at the groups of white soldiers who had gathered there was enough to clear the whole area in a few minutes.

After this there was a short spell of silence. Outside, the army authorities had to regroup their forces. Inside, the ratings got busy settling their organisational problems. A conference of the cooks was called and their role in the battle was explained to them. They must be prepared to feed the fighting ratings. The rations available were not sufficient, they would have to use them sparingly. But their main job was to feed those who were fighting first. They were also told to prepare cold drinks for the ratings who were actively engaged in fighting. Now there was no question of not using the food which had been sent to them by the Naval authorities the previous night. All resources had to be utilised.

Godfrey had decided to begin an all-out offensive. All Indian troops were removed. British troops swarmed into the area of Castle Barracks. The Town Hall became their operations headquarters. By midday there were at least 17 trucks and armoured cars packed with troops armed with light machine-guns, rifles and other weapons held at the ready.

The second phase of the offensive opened with light machine-gun fire from the direction of the gun gate. But the ratings, veterans of many a grim battle, were not in the least terrified. Promptly they took action. The light machine-gun was silenced and the two British soldiers manning it had to be removed to hospital.

Now hell seemed to have been let loose. There was constant firing from both sides. The ratings knew that they were outnumbered, that the enemy had better equipment, but they were still prepared to die fighting in the glorious

traditions of the Indian Navy. They expected total annihilation at any moment. It was like waiting for death with shrouds round their heads. But they fought on without officers, without the so-called experts to guide them. Their experience of the war was enough for them to hold the enemy.

They had to meet danger not only from outside but from inside as well. As the Indian sailors had learnt how to fight through the bitter experience of the war against fascism, so also had the British learnt well from their erstwhile enemies, the Nazis. While attacking from outside they had managed to send some officers inside to sabotage the defences of the ratings.

Some ratings who were guarding the Treasury found three officers inside the office. A strict watch was kept on them but the guards pretended that they had not noticed the officers at all. After some time, when they felt quite safe, the officers gathered round the telephone. The guards immediately rushed inside, ordered them to stop and placed them under arrest.

The ratings decided to give these officers a taste of their own medicine. They made them "double up" for a few minutes. It was just to make them feel what the ratings had to undergo for any slight mistake or neglect of duty on their part. So they ran up and down, panting and fuming.

They were asked how they had managed to enter the Barracks. One of them replied that they had not come from outside but had been unable to get away the previous night. To save their skins they had taken refuge inside the Pay Office.

"What were you doing near the phone?" one of the ratings asked.

"We just wanted to inform the authorities that we were here and ask them to rescue us."

This was just what the ratings had wanted to find out.

"So you wanted the authorities to rescue you, did you? All right we shall rescue you now."

They were made to run all the way to the detention barracks. But the cells had been broken open and they could not be locked up inside. Anyhow they were unceremoniously shoved into a cell and a guard was placed over them.

They were not in a very enviable position. With a battle going on and furious ratings all round them, they felt

quite panicky. Moreover, they had had no food. Some of the ratings took pity on their miserable condition and got permission to remove them to the hospital under guard. This was also considered advisable because some of the ratings were so furious that the lives of the officers were in danger.

At one corner some ratings were busy keeping a strict watch on the movements of the troops outside who were concentrating for an attack. The soldiers too saw a rating watching their activities and aimed at him. Promptly he took cover. After a few minutes he peeped out again. This time a bullet hit him in the neck. Thus fell Sick Berth Attendant Krishnan, the first martyr of the day.

He was lifted up by his comrades and taken to the hospital. The bullet that had lodged in his neck was immediately removed by the doctor, the only officer who could come and go as he pleased. He said that there was no hope of life. Within a few minutes he died.

The ratings present brought out a piece of white cloth, dipped their fingers in the martyr's blood and painted a red cross on it. This was later used as the flag for the hospital. His body was covered with a white shroud and a guard was posted over it.

Thus the battle proceeded, with casualties on both sides. But it was not a lone battle. There was help from all sides. Civilians in the neighbourhood tried to help the ratings. Many a young working-class boy risked his life that day to carry help to his brothers in the Navy, one was actually hit by a bullet while handing over a packet across the walls.

The fight had spread from Castle Barracks to the ships in the stream as well. At about 10 a.m., President Khan came to the break-water. The news of his arrival spread like wild fire. All the ratings expected some directive from him, an order to begin an offensive to relieve their brothers at Castle Barracks.

All the ratings, except those in battle positions gathered round the *Kumaon*. Others crowded the docks. Khan boarded the *Kumaon*, mounted the bridge and addressed the ratings through the mike. He explained what was happening in Castle Barracks and ordered all British officers to abandon ships. Addressing the Indian officers, he said:

"I call upon you to join us in this life and death struggle. It is our common battle against a common enemy. If, however, you are not prepared to cast your lot with us, you too had better follow your white masters and leave the ships."

He then ordered all the ships to gather steam, load their guns and be ready for the next orders. He warned them that, if necessary, they would have to take up battle positions and surround the whole of Bombay city.

"For," he said, "you must defend your own ships and the dockyards at any cost."

It was about 10:30 when he left. The ratings on the ships got busy. They stoked up the boilers and smoke curled up from the funnels. The guns were loaded and got ready. The ships began to hoot as if impatient for action.

HMIS Gondwana. The ratings saw a Royal Navy ship coming towards them. Here was some chance of battle they thought. But they were determined not to fight unless they themselves were attacked. But they had to be prepared for all eventualities. The guns were trained on the British ship. She quietly passed by with the guns of the *Gondwana* following her. It was only when the ship disappeared in the distance that the ratings stood down. The guns were now turned towards the shore.

The Flagship of the RIN, *HMIS Narbada*, veteran of many battles, now became the centre of activity. At mid-day the NCSC met there. This session met under the shadow of a fierce battle developing at Castle Barracks and spreading to other ships and establishments. The British seemed to be preparing for a general offensive.

The main concern of the strike leaders now was to keep the ships and establishments well supplied with food and water during the period of the battles that were going on with increasing intensity. While discussions were going on a signal was received from the *Talwar* that British troops were concentrating round the Gateway of India to start a water-borne attack on the ships.

This question now became the main topic of discussion. It was decided to resist the offensive with arms. Time was short and there was now no question of manoeuvring the

ships. The ships, as they were situated at the moment, would be given definite tasks which they had to fulfil.

The *Clive*, *Khyber* and *Lawrence*, were near the Gateway of India and could resist any offensive from that end. The *Narbada*, *Jumna*, *Kumaon* and others near the dockyards could cover the Ballard Estate area. Orders were accordingly issued from the *Narbada* to these ships to be ready to fire if they saw any suspicious movements. The signals were sent to the *Jumna*, which relayed them to all ships and to the DSS. The DSS too repeated the signals. The *Narbada* was asked to supply extra ammunition wherever it was needed.

After these battle plans had been drawn up, the NCSC considered the question of food and water. Food was not so much of a problem. It was always available from the people. The problem was collecting it.

Already the people of Bombay had rushed to the aid of the ratings. The sea-face round the Gateway of India looked like a fair. Men, women and children, of all classes, of all religions, crowded round the place. The Maratha guards who had been placed there to keep the people away and to prevent the ratings from the ships from landing were hidden by this mass of men. They did not interfere with the people, for their sympathies were with the ratings.

It was a colourful sight. Everywhere, from all sides they came with baskets of food in their hands. There was everything one could ask for—fruits, milk, bread, vegetables, and what not. They were the rations of the poor workers, the struggling lower middle class families, even of well-to-do Indians. The British wanted to starve their heroic brothers in the Navy into submission. That would never be. They were determined to foil the game of the British.

Motorboats came from the ships and these baskets of food were showered on them. As the ratings stepped on shore they were greeted and welcomed by the people with revolutionary slogans. They were embraced by the crowds. The Hindu, Muslim and Irani shopkeepers took the Navy boys into their shops and asked them to take what they wanted.

Yes, food was not a problem. It had to be distributed properly. So the NCSC gave instructions about the proper

distribution of food and water by boat and if possible with the help of messengers.

All plans having been made, the meeting came to an end at about 12:45. Within less than an hour they had to put their plan of operation into action.

The battle at Castle Barracks was now in full swing. At about 1:30 British troops entered the area between the Dockyard and the MTE barracks. Their main offensive was still concentrated on Castle Barracks. But they had intercepted the messages from the *Narbada* and knew that the ships were ready to come to the aid of the ratings on shore.

So now they started a double offensive. Some climbed up the trees and began to fire in the direction of Castle Barracks. Others concentrated their fire on the ships in the break-water. Four men on the *Sindh* were injured. Now the ships were stirred into activity.

The *Punjab* was short of ammunition. The ratings acted quickly. They promptly raided the RN ship which was anchored next to them and brought over all its ammunition. They immediately opened up with one shot from the 12-pounder and followed it up with a concentration from the Oerlikon and anti-aircraft guns. Some 120 rounds were fired within a short time. By this time the other ships had also trained their guns on the same area. HMIS *Oudh* opened up with her 12-pounders. A number of British soldiers were thrown off the trees and the area was soon cleared. Stray sniping and intermittent firing continued for a long time all over the area. It was the same at Castle Barracks at this time. The main offensive having thus been followed by a combined action of both the ratings on the ships and those ashore, the firing died down. Stray firing however continued throughout the day.

The ships now sent signals to Castle Barracks assuring them of their active support and asking them not to surrender if they ran short of ammunition. The ships would come to their aid. They had gathered steam and were ready to come to their aid at any moment. This put new heart into the battle-weary ratings. Every hour or so the ships sent messages to Castle Barracks enquiring about the ammunition situation.

It was about this time, round about 2:30—that the FOCRIN broadcast to the ratings. He called upon them

to surrender unconditionally and threatened them with dire consequences if they refused to obey this order. He said that "overwhelming forces at the disposal of the Government would be used to the uttermost.... even if it meant the destruction of the navy...."

Shortly after this, a message was received that talks were proceeding between the NCSC and the authorities. Intermittent firing continued.

A little after four the NCSC issued instructions for "cease-fire". This was followed by a signal from Khan.

To
Establishments,
All Ships.

From: President.

I hope you will be non-violent. I am meeting FOB and FOCRIN in Castle Barracks. I shall let you know last decision afterwards. Up to that time you should keep complete peace.

T. O. R. 211625

A messenger arrived at Castle Barracks telling them that the FOCRIN was personally coming and a truce was about to be signed.

The ratings were suspicious. They thought that this was a trick to rush in and take them by surprise. They finally decided that they would send three representatives with white flags to meet the FOCRIN half way. A message was also sent back saying that the FOCRIN should also come with a white flag.

At 5:30 three ratings boldly stepped out of Castle Barracks with white flags in their hands. The FOCRIN was nowhere to be seen. They waited for long. The firing had now ceased completely.

After nearly forty-five minutes they saw some members of the NCSC coming with some officers with white flags in their hands. They came to Castle Barracks and told the ratings that negotiations were proceeding between the national leaders and the Government and that they should maintain peace. With disapproval the ratings agreed. But there could be no question of surrendering arms yet.

The cease-fire by this time was complete and every ship and establishment flew the cease-fire flag.

In the meantime the FOB went to have a look round the DSS. He was met at the gates by the Captain of the Guard appointed by the ratings. He asked the FOB and the officers accompanying him to take off their caps before proceeding any further. The Rear-Admiral and the senior officers with him protested. But the rating maintained that these were his orders and he was to ensure that they were obeyed.

Unwillingly the officers took off their caps. They were now provided with an armed escort of six men. They shepherded the officers round. As soon as the other ratings saw the FOB, they began to shout at him.

"Go Back FOB!" they cried. "Fulfil our Demands!"

The reception was too hot for the officers and they left.

When night fell the situation was that of an armed, uneasy truce.

At Castle Barracks, it was reported, the arms and ammunition had been locked up in the guard room. On the ships too the men had stood down but were ready for action. There was a general feeling that the British would start another offensive at night. There was widespread discontent with the FOCRIN's broadcast which, it was feared, might be put into effect any moment.

But the morale of the ratings was very high. They had seen how the people had come to their aid and everywhere the only topic of conversation was that the people of Bombay were going to come out on a strike the next day. The real battle was about to begin. Godfrey had threatened to destroy them but now the people would come to their aid and they would jointly fight the enemy.

News had also come in of the armed action by the *Hindustan* at Karachi. Further, the radio also mentioned Attlee's threat in Parliament that British Navy vessels were going to Bombay. General Headquarters announced "strong Naval and Military reinforcements are on their way to Bombay, Karachi and Poona."

It was under the shadow of this offensive from the British and the preparations for a counter-offensive by the people that the NCSC met to review the situation, discuss future plans, issue a statement to the Press and draw up a situation report for the other ratings.

The various factors were discussed at the meeting of the NCSC. The following statement was drafted explaining

the position of the ratings and calling upon the people to back them in this unequal fight:

"The Central Strike Committee of the strikers in the Indian Navy makes this earnest appeal to the leaders of the political parties in India and the Indian people.

"We have all of us been in the Indian Navy for several years. During this time we have been undergoing untold hardships, low pay, bad food and the most outrageous racial discrimination. Also, today, with the end of the war, the problem of demobilisation and resettlement has come for all the thousands of us.

"We have innumerable times made representations to the authorities for the redressal of our grievances, particularly about racial discrimination and for equality of treatment, a demand which every self-respecting patriot will completely support. But the authorities never listened.

"Therefore, following the example of the brothers in the RIAF we decided to go on strike. For the last five days we have been on a peaceful, disciplined, organised strike.

"The authorities, however, have refused to listen to us. Instead, they have called up the Military, particularly British troops, since naturally they could not trust our Indian Army brothers. They opened fire on us in Castle Barracks and forced us to take to arms to defend ourselves.

"Now the Flag Officer is threatening us with total destruction, using the overwhelming armed forces of the Empire.

"No Indian could expect us to surrender on such humiliating terms, to bend so low before the threatening jack-boot of our imperialist rulers. And we shall not surrender to threats, though we are always prepared to negotiate about our demands.

"But we know too that the Flag Officer will carry out this threat unless, you, our people, and our respected political leaders, come to our aid.

"You do not want your Indian brothers to be destroyed by British bullets. You know our demands are just, you must support us.

"We appeal to you all, particularly to the leaders of the Congress, League and Communist Parties:

"Use all your might to prevent a bloodbath in Bombay!

"Force the Naval Authorities to stop shooting and threats and to negotiate with us!

"Rally our people to support us, through a peaceful hartal and peaceful strikes!

"We appeal to you, our brothers and sisters, to respond.

"We await your reply.

"NAVAL CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE

"Bombay, February 21, 1946."

The statement was sent to the Press and also signalled to various establishments.

A situation report was next drafted to give all the strikers a general picture of the position at the end of the day.

"NEWS FROM 'TALWAR'

"Yesterday night Indian military pickets went over to the Castle Barracks strikers. So this morning about nine, the pickets were made up of British Other Ranks (BORs) and Pathans.

"At nine firing started at Castle Barracks and it was thus isolated from the Dockyards. Approximately ten ratings were killed and fifteen BORs. The firing continued now and again till evening.

"At *Talwar* on Wednesday evening the ratings demanded the withdrawal of military guards. The President of the Strike Committee, M. S. Khan, asked them not to use force and to keep themselves under control. This morning the strike continued in a disciplined manner with no incidents.

"In the afternoon 1,200 RIAF men went in a procession in support of the strike, and at three the Naval Accounts civilian staff also went on strike.

"In the Dockyards the whole situation was under control and there was no firing. The ships are standing ready to act. Discipline among strikers is good. Pending further decisions of the Committee and the talks of M. S. Khan, the President, with the FOCRIN, the cease-fire signal is flown from the signal station. Ships have been asked to stand in readiness but not to open fire.

"The public is very enthusiastic and promises full support. At Apollo Bunder, Gateway of India, boats from the

ships come alongside and go back laden with gifts from the public who greet them with 'Jai Hind'. They promise to stand solidly behind their demands.

"The British RN fleet is reported to be off Bombay port. But it is said that they are not going to do any shelling first. In general the spirit and determination of the ratings to fight is high."

This short review of the situation was circulated to all ships and establishments.

The meeting ended after an hour-and-a-half's sitting.

The day was over, a day of intense activity, of bloodshed and unparalleled heroism. Now night descended on Bombay. It was a calm and peaceful night, the lights from the ships dotted the waters, like a half-moon the city lights garlanded the shore.

It was a night of weariness and sleep. A watchful anxiety persisted everywhere. You could not trust a wily enemy, could you? After all Godfrey had promised to use the maximum force. So guards were chosen and duties were allotted for the night.

Everyone talked of the coming day. They were now sure of victory. They were to be reinforced by the people of Bombay who were coming out on strike. Workers, students, the common people were all coming together to join them. Now the day reckoning was at hand.

Sleep came over them quickly that night, after a day of heroic activity. Clutching their arms, they gradually dozed off. It was a night of serious expectations and yet full of hope for the morrow.

Chapter Six

THE SURRENDER

FEBRUARY 22. The morning papers brought to the public of Bombay a number of appeals and statements concerning the RIN strike. The appeal of the NCSC calling upon the people to observe hartal in sympathy with the Naval strikers was prominently featured.

The Communist Party called for a general strike. Its appeal read:

"Every Indian will condemn the brutal attempt of the alien Government to suppress with blood and iron the attempts of the men of the RIN establishments in Bombay to obtain redress of their just and urgent grievances. Every Indian will resent the arrogant 'Submit or Perish' threat given by the Flag Officer Commanding to these brave men.

"On behalf of the Communist Party of India, I [Secretary, Bombay Committee, CPI] appeal to all parties and all our people to refuse to allow this brutal suppression of our brothers in the Navy and Air Force and to observe tomorrow (Friday) as a complete hartal in all shops, schools, colleges and mills as a mark of their disapproval of Government repression and to demand immediate cessation of repression, the opening of negotiations and the satisfaction of the just demand of the strikers."

Sardar Patel had also issued a statement instructing the people not to observe hartal. He said:

"The unfortunate clash between the naval ratings and the British naval and military police has resulted in creating an atmosphere of tension in the city. The tension has been further accentuated today when reports of the pitched

battle between the naval ratings and the British naval and military police were spread throughout the city. The immediate cause of the firing is not known; nor is it possible to ascertain the actual loss of life which it is feared may be very large. Without knowing all the facts, it is not possible to say whether all this regrettable loss could not have been avoided.

"Congress work

"The Congress was making all possible efforts to bring about a peaceful settlement of the long-standing legitimate grievances of the naval ratings. Until yesterday, there was good hope for restoring harmony and goodwill between them. Who was responsible for the unfortunate turn of events which led to these disastrous consequences and what was the actual provocation which led to them is not known, but this is not an opportune moment to assess the relative responsibilities or to apportion blame between the parties concerned.

"The primary and immediate duty of every responsible man is to see that peace is restored between the parties as also to see that the city is not plunged into trouble and its peaceful atmosphere not disturbed. Every effort should be made to prevent panic and to control the unruly elements which always are on the lookout to take advantage of such a situation. The best thing for the people to do is to go about their normal business as usual.

"No Hartal

"There should be no attempt to call for a hartal or stoppage of mills or closing of schools and colleges. Such a thing is not likely to help the unfortunate naval ratings in their efforts to get redress of their legitimate grievances or in the great difficulty in which they find themselves. All possible efforts are being made by the Congress to help them out of their difficulty and to see that their genuine grievances are immediately redressed. The Congress has a big party in the Central Assembly and is doing its best to help them. I would, therefore, earnestly appeal to them to be patient and peaceful and also to the people to maintain strict discipline and to do nothing to disturb the peace in the city in the present state of high tension."

The two contradictory statements from two political parties did confuse issues to a certain extent. But when the people read the full statement broadcast by the FOCRIN, their minds were made up. The FOCRIN said:

"In the present regrettable state of indiscipline in the Service, I have adopted this means of addressing the R.I.N. as being the way in which I can speak to the greatest number of you at one time.

"To start with every one of you must realise that the Government of India has no intention of allowing indiscipline to continue, or their actions to be influenced by such indiscipline. They will take the most stringent measures to restore discipline using the vast forces at their disposal if necessary. I ask you to bear this in mind in considering the other things which I have to say to you now.

"As regards the requests made by those of you who waited on the Flag Officer, Bombay, on Tuesday, the 19th February, you may be assured that all reasonable complaints, or grievances (if any), will be fully investigated. Demobilisation will proceed strictly in accordance with age and service groups, though you must realise that this will mean that the Service will lose its trained nucleus of experienced ratings, especially in the Communication Branch.

"The whole question of pay, travelling allowances and family allowances is now being examined by an inter-Services Committee. This Committee has just been afloat in one of H.M.I. ships and has visited establishments in Karachi, Jamnagar and Bombay.

"The situation in Bombay this morning both afloat and ashore is deplorable. A state of open rioting prevails in which ratings appear to have completely lost control of their senses.

"In order to ensure that ratings confined to barracks did actually stay there and to avoid a recurrence of the unfortunate incidents of the day before it was necessary to place small guards of soldiers on the gates of the *Talwar* and Castle Barracks last night.

"This morning ratings from Castle Barracks burst through the guard which was forced to open fire. This fire was replied to by ratings inside the barracks. The only reason for firing in the first place was to contain ratings within the barracks and not to coerce or intimidate them.

"I want again to make it quite plain that the Government of India will never give in to violence. To continue the struggle is the height of folly when you take into account the overwhelming forces at the disposal of the Government at this time, and which will be used to their uttermost even if it means the destruction of the Navy of which we have been so proud."

This was enough to justify every action of the ratings. Its insulting approach to the problem angered the people. And from the early morning they gathered on the streets, to defy authority, to join forces with their heroic brothers in the Navy.

All over the Fort area were pasted appeals to the British soldiers asking them not to fight against the Indian ratings who were only fighting for their just democratic rights. It created quite a sensation. All over the city there was an atmosphere of defiance. The people were preparing to demonstrate their condemnation of the crimes committed by the foreigners the previous day.

Among the ratings too there was tremendous excitement. From the ships the ratings went by boat to the Gateway of India but could not come ashore. Indian troops had been replaced by British troops. They swaggered round the place in a menacing manner and kept the civilians away. The public had again brought food packets but they could only look at the ships and boats in the distance and could not help the ratings with food. From a distance greetings were exchanged, slogans shouted, solidarity expressed.

Fort Barracks. The ratings got up early, dressed in civilian clothes and slipped out into the city. Everywhere they found British soldiers patrolling the streets. It made their blood boil. They wanted to rush at them, do something desperate. But they had to keep quiet. Negotiations were going on.

In the streets they met some ratings from the *Talwar* and together went round to see how successful the strike was. Clashes with the police and military had already started developing. The ratings were waiting for action.

Castle Barracks. All was calm. The ratings on duty moved about carrying on their jobs. The others lay about tired and sleepy.

Khan and members of the Negotiating Committee had a busy day. They were anxiously rushing about from the house of one political leader to another. Khan was seen coming in and out of the house of Sardar Patel or Mr. Chundrigar of the Muslim League. It was feverish activity, a last attempt to get the leaders to intervene and stop wanton bloodshed, which seemed inevitable.

At 11 a.m. the FOB released a statement from Godfrey. It was announced to all ratings over the loud-hailer.

"The following message is from Admiral Godfrey, Flag Officer Commanding, Royal Indian Navy:

'I told you yesterday that ample forces are available to restore order. The GOC, Southern Command, has been ordered by His Excellency the C-in-C to assume supreme control in Bombay. To show you that ample forces are available he has ordered a formation of RAF aircraft to fly over the harbour today. These aircraft will not fly over the ships nor take any offensive action, provided no action is taken against them. Should you now have decided in accordance with my warning to surrender unconditionally you are to hoist a Black Flag or a Blue Flag and muster all hands on deck on the side facing Bombay city and await further orders.'"

In the meantime battles raged on the streets of Bombay. Barricades were thrown up where the Congress, League and Red flags flew together. Behind them stood the people defending the honour of these flags, the honour of the Naval ratings and the honour of Mother India.

At about 2 : 30 a formation of RAF aircraft flew low over Bombay city and the harbour area.

The ratings from the Fort Barracks returned to their establishment shortly afterwards to find out if there was any news. At about three, a meeting was held to discuss the situation which had arisen as a result of the FOCRIN's latest threat and the fight that was going on in the streets between the people and the British military.

Some of the ratings who had just returned from outside described the scenes they had witnessed, of barricades, of wanton murder by British troops, of indiscriminate firing and of heroic resistance by the common people.

"They are not sailors, they are not soldiers," said a speaker, "they are not trained fighters. They are the ordinary sons of our people. But they have shown us today that they too can fight, and that without arms.

"Now there can be no surrender. Blood has been spilt, the precious blood of our people, of our brothers and sisters. The debt of this blood has to be repaid a hundredfold. If we surrender now we shall never be able to show our face to the people.

"We must continue the fight. The whole country is behind us. Our victory is assured."

Speaker after speaker rose to echo the same sentiment of determination to carry on the fight and not to surrender unconditionally. The battle that was being waged in the streets gave them new courage, a new power of resistance.

The strike leaders were still negotiating but it seemed a hopeless effort. The President sent a desperate message to all ships and establishments.

To
General

From President, NSC.

Do not surrender unconditionally. Be peaceful and carry on strike. Come what may. Let anything happen.

T.O.R. 221730

President.

This message was read at the meeting and greeted with shouts of "Jai Hind" and "Inquilab Zindabad". Everyone seemed assured that the strike was going to continue and that they would fight on the streets together with the common people till final victory was won.

But within half an hour the situation changed. At six Khan came to the breakwater with members of the Negotiating Committee. The ratings on the different ships crowded on the decks. Others gathered round him on the Docks.

Addressing them through a loudspeaker he read out Sardar Patel's message, which said:

"In the present unfortunate circumstances that have developed, the advice of the Congress to the RIN ratings is

to lay down arms and to go through the formality of surrender which has been asked for. The Congress will do its level best to see that there is no victimisation and the legitimate demands of the naval ratings are accepted as soon as possible.

"There is considerable tension all over the city and there has been heavy loss of life and property. There is also considerable strain both on the Naval ratings as well as on the authorities.

"While fully appreciating their spirit and courage and also having full sympathy in their present difficulties, the best advice that the Congress can give them in the present circumstances is to end the tension immediately. This advice is in the interests of all concerned."

In a tired voice Khan reported on his talks with the Sardar. Finally he said:

"I am of opinion that, having received this assurance, we should now surrender and lay down our arms. We can rely on our leaders to see that justice is done. Do not think that we are surrendering to the British. We are surrendering to the people, because the whole nation is with us."

The ratings on the ships protested loudly. A storm of voices were hurled at him.

"We don't want to fight," they said, "but we won't give up the strike."

The Muslims among them, and they were many, put him question after question. Had he met Muslim League leaders at all?

"We don't want to put ourselves," they said, "in the hands of one party. We at least want an assurance from the Muslim League before we give up."

Khan assured them that he had met Mr. Chundrigar, the Muslim League leader, but had failed to get any assurances of support or help from him. Chundrigar had expressed his regret saying that he was unable to give any assurance unless he got a directive from the League High Command.

The news of Khan's speech spread to all ships and establishments. The confidence which had prevailed a few minutes earlier seemed completely shattered. Once more the ratings collected together in groups to discuss the sudden turn of events.

Everywhere the same arguments were repeated over and over again. Why should they surrender now, when victory was in sight? The people had now joined forces with them. They were not alone any more. Their fight had merged with the fight of the common people of India for freedom. Why should they surrender now? Hundreds of their brothers and sisters had shed their blood for their cause, brutally murdered by the military. Was it all in vain? Was it not their duty now to come out on the streets, get behind the barricades together with their people and carry on the fight against the common enemy?

A majority of the ratings thought this way and asked their representatives to plead their case at the meeting of the NCSC when the final decision was taken.

While these discussions were going on in ship after ship and in every shore establishment, Khan was again busy negotiating with the military authorities, trying to get permission for the members of the NCSC to come together for a final meeting at the *Talwar* to consider the question of surrender.

A statement was also issued to the Press, thanking the people for their support and sacrifice.

"BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF BOMBAY,

"We congratulate you, dear citizens of Bombay, workers, students, and all, for the great expression of solidarity with us today.

"We mourn with you the deaths of the many due to the indiscriminate firing of the British military forces and condemn the wanton murder by the imperialists of so many of our people.

"Here among us our strike continues and it will continue so long as you help us.

"Here we are solid and sure. We are doing our best, with the added strength that you by your stand have given us, to bring victory to our cause, a victory that will be yours and ours together.

"We are negotiating and we hope to achieve success. But for success your help, your disciplined protests and strikes must continue. This alone will show the brutal military and bureaucratic authorities that they must reckon

not only with us but also with you, dear brethren and sisters of Bombay, if they try to drown us in blood.

“NAVAL CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE

“Bombay, February 22, 1946”

At 11:30 p.m. a messenger went round to all ships waking up the members of the NCSC and asking them to proceed at once to the *Talwar*. Passes had been procured from the military authorities and were handed over to the members of the NCSC.

It was about 1:30 in the morning when most of the representatives reached the *Talwar*. The representatives from Castle Barracks and Fort Barracks were late and only arrived at 2.

It was then that the meeting started. The final historic session of the Naval Central Strike Committee began at last. It lasted till morning.

About thirty-six people were present. Khan gave a detailed report of his talks with Sardar Patel and the FOB. He said that the decision of the NCSC must reach the FOB by 6:30 in the morning. Otherwise the armed truce would be over and the entire force at his disposal would be used against the ratings. Once again he advised surrender.

For a few minutes there was an uproar. Except for a small minority, everyone was opposed to the idea of surrender. That was the directive they had received from the ratings they represented. There could be no unconditional surrender. That would only be inviting defeat at the moment of victory. As one of the ratings put it: “We cannot surrender now. We are about to win our demands. The people are behind us now, our struggle has become part of the struggle of our people to be free, if we surrender now we shall be betraying them. We called upon them to come to our aid: they came, they sacrificed their lives. The British military brutally mowed down men, women and children with machine-guns. The people’s spirit of resistance has risen, they are going to continue their fight. How can we back out now?”

“If surrender we must, we can only give back the command of the ships to the officers. The strike must continue. We cannot give it up till our demands are fulfilled. Such an action will help everyone. You know that our national

leaders are moving an adjournment motion in the Central Assembly on our strike. We must strengthen their hands by continuing the strike.

"I have already referred to the heroic sacrifices made by the people in our cause. By continuing the strike we can give expression to our solidarity with the people, express our sympathy for those who were killed yesterday. We can prove that we are one with our people."

Khan rose again. "There is little time to lose," he said. "For over three hours we have discussed the question. My mind is made up. We must surrender. As for you, if you want to carry on the fight you can do so. But let me warn you that the *Talwar* has already taken a decision to call off the strike and surrender unconditionally. This decision was reached early last night, before the meeting of the NCSC began. Now it is for you to decide."

For a moment there was an amazed silence. What could be the meaning of this move? Then all the fury of the majority of the ratings burst forth. It was a betrayal. They would not tolerate it. They were sure that if they carried on the struggle the *Talwar* ratings would also join. They would fight on the streets behind the barricades with their people. But the fight must go on. The decision of the majority must be obeyed.

Those who were vacillating were now more afraid. Unless they were united, they would never be able to fight. If once disunity and disruption began it would spread. Then the British could crush them one by one. They must come to some sort of compromise decision.

It was at this moment that a rating came in with a message. The *Free Press Journal* had rung up to say that Mr. Jinnah, in a statement issued at Calcutta, had expressed his sympathy with the ratings.

Mr. Jinnah had said:

"The Press reports that the RIN strike at Bombay has taken a very serious turn and reports that the ratings in Calcutta and Karachi have gone on strike have caused serious apprehensions.

"Newspaper reports from various parts of India, and particularly from Bombay, Karachi and Calcutta, show that the RIN men have some very just grievances and it has been made clear by them how deeply they are affected by

these grievances and how they genuinely feel hurt about their present position.

"No civilised Government or responsible man in this country can treat their feelings and grievances lightly.

"I offer my services unreservedly for the cause of the RIN men to see that justice is done to them. If they will adopt constitutional, lawful and peaceful methods and appraise me fully of what will satisfy them, I give them my assurance that I shall do my best to see that their grievances are redressed.

"I appeal to all RIN men not to play into the hands of those who want to create trouble and exploit those on strike for their own ends. I urge upon them to restore normal conditions and let us handle the situation, which will surely result in their welfare and will be in their best interests. I, therefore, appeal to the men of the RIN and to the ratings to call off the strike and to the public in general not to add to the difficulties of the situation. Particularly, I call upon the Muslims to stop and to create no further trouble until we are in a position to handle this very serious situation. If we fail to make the authorities understand and meet the just demands of the RIN men, then it will be time for us all with perfect unity amongst ourselves, to force the hands of the Government if they are not reasonable."

There were wild cheers as the statement was read by Khan.

"Now there can be no question," he said, "of not surrendering. Both the national organisations have pledged support. We have won."

The tables were now completely turned. The more militant ratings still claimed that the only guarantee against victimisation and for the winning of the demands was continued action.

But those who had been vacillating were now completely won over. There could be no reason not to rely on the promises of the leaders. With the people behind them, with the support of the leaders, their case was really won. The Naval authorities could now do nothing against them.

The time for discussion was over. The resolution accepting the surrender was placed before the meeting.

"On the advice and intervention of Sardar Vallabhbhai

Patel, we have decided to surrender ourselves in the hands of the Indian people.

"Sardar Patel has taken the responsibility and assures us that there will be no victimisation of our comrades.

"We are grateful to the citizens of Bombay and particularly our comrades-in-arms, the students, the workers in the docks, transport and factories, for the solidarity and support they extended to our cause.

"We pay our respectful homage to those brave citizens and workers who have perished or have been injured like some of our comrades at the hands of the British authority for the crime of demonstrating their sympathy with our cause."

"NAVAL CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE

"Bombay, February 23, 1946"

A vote was taken. Only six members opposed the decision to surrender. The rest were all in favour of Khan's motion. These six representatives came from the *Punjab*, *Assam*, *Khyber*, *Jumna*, MMS 129 and from Castle Barracks. It will be remembered that Castle Barracks had been represented by two men. One of them voted with the majority.

The decision to surrender was taken. It was nearly six. Khan left to convey the decision to the FOB. The resolution passed at the meeting was immediately sent to the Press. It was decided that a fuller statement should also be drafted.

The members of the NCSC had a lot to do. They had to hurry back to their respective ships and establishments and carry to them the decision to surrender. They knew from their own experience during their meeting that it would be difficult to convince the rank and file ratings of the correctness of the decision. For the six who had opposed the decision, it was more difficult.

"I have not the heart," one of them said, "to go back and tell the boys that we must surrender. But the decision has been taken and we must all abide by it."

Discipline must be maintained to the last. So they went. Some however, got busy preparing a statement for the Press.

Everywhere the ratings were disappointed with the

decision. They listened quietly to the report of their representatives and quietly walked away. It was all over. Yes, they did not agree with it. But the decision had been taken by their leaders and they were going to abide by it. Discipline would be maintained.

They had not long to wait. A signal came.

To General RIN,

All ships hoist Black Flag. Remain quiet on board.
Will endeavour to send rations.

T. O. R. 230735.

One by one the three flags of the Congress, League and Communist Parties came down from the flag masts. The black flags went up. It was all over.

At 8 a.m. the FOB began his tour of the ships and establishments. The officers were already back and the surrender ceremony over. The arms were collected and the strikers were removed from the guns. British troops were posted inside the barracks and the dockyard.

Out in the streets of Bombay anxious crowds were already gathering. The newsboys told the news. People hurriedly grabbed at the papers and read the unbelievable news. They could scarcely believe their eyes. But there it was, the resolution of the NCSC. So it was all over.

What gave them hope, however, was the last message of the Naval Central Strike Committee, before it signed its final death warrant. It was an inspiring document, which will find a place of honour and glory in the history of our national movement.

"The Naval Central Strike Committee wishes to inform the people of India and particularly the people of Bombay that it has decided to call off the strike. It has come to the decision after discussions with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who has assured them that the Congress would see that there was absolutely no victimisation of any of the strikers and that their just demands would be taken up with the authorities. Confident that the Congress would stand by them and sure of the support of the Muslim League after the sympathetic statement of Mr. Jinnah, the Committee decided to call off the strike.

"The Committee, however, reminds the Naval and

Government authorities and tells the people and leaders of all the political parties, particularly Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Mr. Jinnah, that the Ratings in the Navy will not hesitate one moment to come out and strike again if the authorities make any attempt to victimise a single striker.

"The Naval Central Strike Committee once more congratulates the people of Bombay, particularly the workers, students and citizens, for their sympathetic strike during the past two days. These actions have inspired the men in the Navy with the consciousness that all India believed their cause to be just and right.

"Together with the people, the Committee mourns the loss of hundreds of lives due to the brutal and absolutely unjustified firing by the British military forces on innocent men and women. It condemns with all the force at its command this action of the Military and the Government which has resulted in a bloodbath in Bombay, worse than any India has yet seen.

"And a last word to our dear people:

"You have stood by us. We are glad, proud and grateful for that. We mourn the loss of life. Had you not stood by us and demonstrated in your thousands, our cause and our strike would have been drowned in blood. The authorities may yet try to victimise us and punish us. We shall fight that—we ask you also to be ready to fight that and redeem the solemn promise of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Mr. Jinnah.

"Our strike has been a historic event in the life of our nation. For the first time the blood of men in the Services and in the streets flowed together in a common cause.

"We in the Services, will never forget this. We know also that you, our brothers and sisters, will not forget.

"Long live our great people! Jai Hind!"

"NAVAL CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE

"Bombay, February 23, 1946"

The people of Bombay rushed out in their hundreds to the Gateway of India. But there it was, the black flags and the last message. Yes all the ships and establishments in Bombay and the neighbourhood had surrendered—all except one.

Chapter Seven

A LONE BATTLE

ONE Naval Establishment had refused to surrender. It was HMIS *Akbar*, at Thana. Its representative had not been able to attend the last meeting of the NCSC and they could not believe the report that the battle was over. They had fought a lone battle throughout and were not prepared to surrender.

As has already been recounted, the news of the RIN strike at Bombay had reached the *Akbar* only on February 19. Throughout the day they had carried on their duties with a heavy heart, unable to decide what to do. At night some members of the *Talwar* Strike Committee had come to see them but the CO refused to let them in. This news was enough provocation. Next morning there was a complete strike. Fighting against all the obstacles placed before them, the 3,500 ratings went to Bombay. At night they returned after Godfrey's order that all ratings must return to ships or barracks by 3:30.

Next morning, February 21, the strike continued. The ratings sat about in an angry mood, the officers were nowhere to be seen, the whole establishment seemed to be in the hands of the ratings.

A telephone call came from the *Talwar* asking the representative in the NCSC to proceed there immediately. Picking up a truck, the elected representative rushed towards Bombay. A few other ratings accompanied him. At Kurla they were suddenly stopped by military pickets and ordered to return to Thana. For some time they argued with the non-commissioned officer in charge of the picket. They were going for an urgent meeting. They had official

permission to go. But this wooden-headed British soldier was not to be convinced.

"Those are my orders," he said. "I cannot allow you to go. Even if your CO came and told me that I could let you pass, I would not. You must go back to Thana."

For quite a few minutes the ratings angrily argued with the man. But it was useless. They were not armed. Moreover, they realised that they would not have been able to force their way through even if they had had arms. They had to return.

They were now cut off from Bombay, the *Talwar* and the collective guidance of the NCSC.

At 11 a.m. another telephone message came. The military had opened fire on Castle Barracks. The ratings were very excited, they were anxious to go to the help of their brothers but they felt quite helpless. All that they could do was to declare a hunger-strike. Spontaneously they took the decision and everyone abided by it.

The day passed uneventfully.

In the evening some 300 sepoy from the RIASC Camp, Kurla, marched into the *Akbar*. The ratings gathered on the parade ground and looked at them wondering what they wanted. When they came and said that they too had gone on strike and had come to express their solidarity with them, the ratings were wild with joy.

They rushed to the sepoy and embraced them while shouts of "Jai Hind" and "Inquilab Zindabad" rent the skies.

The *Akbar* was now in the hands of the ratings. The sepoy were their guests and had to be entertained. Something had to be done. This was a unique occasion. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

The guests were taken to the canteen where they crowded together and talked. Each listened to the other's story of the strike. Food and drink were prepared and the sepoy were treated as honoured guests.

A rating got up on a chair in the crowded room filled with cigarette smoke and delivered an address of welcome.

"We are glad," he said, "that our brothers have also joined us in the struggle to end all tyranny in the Services. I thank them on behalf of the other ratings. Now nobody can defeat us. Our victory is certain.

"We have one request to make. You must go out and

persuade other units of the Army to join us too. If you succeed in doing this, if you succeed in spreading the message of revolt to the other units, then, not only will our demands be fulfilled, but we shall also be able to liberate our country.

"Towards the end of the war we have been in a few countries which had recently been liberated from the fascists; we have seen in the people a new life, a new spirit, a new hope for a better existence. Thus have we learnt what it means to be free.

"Today, we have to show the world that the Indian soldiers know not only how to smash the fascists and liberate other countries, but also how to fight against their own oppressors and liberate their own country."

This speech was received with cheers. A sepoy rose to thank the ratings.

"On behalf of my comrades," he said, "I thank you all for the excellent reception you have given us. We assure you that we shall stand by you to the last, whatever happens. You must not surrender. The fight must be fought to the finish.

"We shall do our best to carry out the task you have allotted to us. We shall send our messengers to other units, to preach revolt. We shall try to get more men to join the strike, so that we can launch the final battle for the liberation of our country."

It was 9 p.m. when the meeting broke up. The sepoys got ready to march back. But how could that be allowed? The ratings immediately invited them to use their trucks. After all, it was all theirs now. Those who knew how to drive volunteered to take them back to their camp.

Amid shouts of "Jai Hind" and "Inquilab Zindabad" the sepoys left.

This visit of the sepoys from Kurla cheered up the ratings a lot. They felt again that they were not alone. It seemed obvious to them now that more and more units of the three Services would join up and this would lead to a great revolt. They also expected the British offensive to increase as well.

The leading ratings of the camp got together to discuss the situation and plan a defence of the establishment if the British should attack. It was decided that they would break open the armoury and post a guard over it. Thus they would

be able to take up arms to defend themselves at short notice in case of an emergency. They thought that it would be best to break open the armoury after midnight.

A little after midnight, a few ratings gathered together round the armoury. As softly as they could, they broke open the lock. They threw open the doors of the armoury and, to their surprise, it was empty. They were bewildered. Now what would happen?

Nothing could be done that night. In the morning it was discovered that the authorities had removed the arms and ammunition on the very first day of the strike. Now a search was started throughout the camp but it was all in vain.

The whole day passed in discussions on how to procure arms and how to defend themselves in case they were attacked. Surrender they would not. That was definite.

Nothing of importance happened that day. The night too passed peacefully. Of course they had no news as to what was happening in Bombay.

February 23. Shortly after midday the CO came back. He showed the ratings a signal which declared that the ratings in Bombay had surrendered and the strike was over. He called upon them to surrender too.

The ratings could not believe him. How could it be? 'Were not they going to fight to the finish? Was not this struggle going to lead to the final battle for liberation? No, the officer was only trying to trick them into submission. They were not fools. They were not going to surrender.

Some of them replied to the CO:

"We do not believe you. You are trying to bluff us with bogus signals."

The CO tried to argue with them.

"All right," they said, "if it is true, bring a member of the Central Strike Committee here. If he tells us that the strike is over, then we shall see."

The CO was definitely frightened. He went away to get military help but there were no further developments that day. The ratings were anxious and angry. They could not believe that their struggle was over. The more they thought about it, the more determined they became to continue the struggle, even if it meant fighting alone. Like sulky boys

they moved about the barracks. They spoke little and, when they did, in sharp tones, of disgust and anger.

The night passed in anxiety. What had happened? If they could only find out the truth.

February 24. Again, after midday, a signal was circulated saying that if the ratings did not come on parade by four in the afternoon, British troops would be called and they would be taken to the parade ground by force. Thus the war of nerves against the ratings was pressed forward.

The signal passed from hand to hand but they all stayed where they were, silent and sulky. The threat seemed to have no effect at all. Just before four they quietly entered their barracks and decided to remain inside. This time there was no planning, no discussion, no directions from the leading ratings. But they moved like one.

The CO came round the barracks. He saw the verandas deserted. Peeping into the room he saw the ratings sitting quietly there. Not a sound did they make. But anger was writ large on their faces, a futile anger at their inability to do anything.

The CO knew that he alone would not be able to handle this barrel of gunpowder. He dared not approach them himself. British military guards were waiting a little distance from the camp. He ordered them to come over and take charge.

At five, the British troops marched into the camp. They were armed with rifles with fixed bayonets and light machine guns. Quietly they surrounded the barracks and asked the ratings to come out and surrender. There was not a sound from inside. Once more the British tommies outside barked the orders. But who cared. The ratings were determined not to leave their barracks.

Now they rushed inside and pricked a few ratings with their bayonets, hustling them out of the barracks. Seeing their comrades in trouble, the others immediately rushed out into the open. Now they decided to follow a new course. They quietly came to the parade ground and sat down there. They simply refused to get up.

The bugle was sounded for the surrender ceremony. The black flag was to be hoisted but not a single rating stood up. They knew by then that the struggle was over but

what they realised fully well was that the NCSC had surrendered not to the brute force of the British but to the people. Hence they were not prepared to undergo this senseless surrender ceremony.

Again the bugle was sounded. Again the ratings refused to move. In exasperation the CO shouted at them to stand up and go through the surrender ceremony. But nobody bothered to listen to him. They remained sitting.

The CO now ordered the BORs to get ready to open fire. Even this threat had no effect. There was not a movement among the ratings. It seemed that they were prepared to lay down their lives for their cause.

The CO ordered the BORs to make a bayonet charge. Now the ratings stood up, but that was all. They would not move an inch.

The CO gave the order: "Fall in by Divisions!"

There was complete silence. Not a man moved. The CO repeated his order but to no effect. Thrice he thundered at the ratings. There was no response.

Finally, once again, the BORs rushed at them with bayonets and sorted them out into divisions. A roll call was now taken. All but 500, who remained stubbornly silent, replied. They were arrested but were released the next morning.

Though the strike was thus broken at bayonet-point, work did not start immediately. Tactfully, the CO declared the next day a holiday. The ratings moved round the barracks with heavy hearts. Everyone wore a gloomy look. They did not even speak to one another. They realised that resistance was now useless so there was no point in discussing on what they could do. The subject had better not be discussed at all.

Next morning, February 26, the bugle sounded again, as usual, for morning parade. Slowly the men trickled on to the parade ground. Here a surprise awaited them.

Twenty-three ratings were picked out as ring-leaders. In two batches of twelve and eleven they were taken away from the parade ground. No explanations were offered. They were asked to pack their kit and carried away in different lorries.

Their destination was unknown. The others gathered round them as they left. It was a sad parting. The ratings looked on silently. The prisoners shouted as the lorries moved out of the gates: "Goodbye Akbar. Jai Hind!" There was no response; the rest of the ratings bid them a silent farewell. Their lone battle was finally over.

Chapter Eight

BATTLE ON THE 'HINDUSTAN'

THE news of the RIN strike at Bombay first reached Karachi on the afternoon of February 19.

There were two RIN ships in the harbour, HMIS *Hindustan* and HMIS *Travancore*. The shore establishments, HMIS *Bahadur*, *Himalaya* and *Chamak* were in Manora island. The *Bahadur* was the boys' training centre.

At the *Chamak*, the CO was an Indian officer, Lt. Commander Chatterji. As soon as he received the news of the strike, he called a meeting of all the ratings and told them in detail what had happened. The ratings listened attentively to the whole story. Finally, Commander Chatterji said: "Now, you must understand that this is only a local affair. The strike on the *Talwar* and of the other ratings of Bombay has nothing to do with you. Here you do not get abuses flung at you and as for the demand for an Indian Commanding Officer, you have already got one. So you have no reason to complain and no reason to go on strike."

In spite of the speech by the CO, the ratings spent a very agitated day. They instinctively felt that they should do something to help their brothers at Bombay. It was not quite true that they had no reason to complain. They had quite a number of grievances which were similar to those of the other ratings.

The day, however, passed without incident. In the evening, the ratings from the *Himalaya* and the *Bahadur* arrived at the *Chamak*. They also had heard the news and were very excited. Something had to be done. Here was a chance for jointly fighting against all the injustices they had so long borne silently.

A secret meeting was held at the *Chamak* at 9 p.m.

Ratings from the other establishments attended. The discussion was long and inconclusive. The *Chamak* ratings felt that they should not do anything rash. Finally, it was decided that they should go on peaceful stay-in strike to demonstrate their sympathy with the *Talwar*. No date, however, was fixed. There was a lot of difference of opinion about it. The general feeling was one of wait and see.

On the ships, however, things moved fast. HMIS *Hindustan* was due to sail in the morning. When the ratings got the news of the strike, they immediately decided to start their struggle the very next morning. They felt that once they were on the high seas they would be completely helpless and isolated; while in port they were sure to get the support of the ratings on shore. Moreover they had their own grievances too. Their First Lieutenant was a notorious person for abuse and ill-treatment of the men.

That night they met secretly and drew up their list of demands and decided that before the ship set sail next morning a batch of them would demonstrate, declare a strike and present their demands to the CO. In their list of demands they included the removal of the unpopular First Lieutenant.

On HMIS *Travancore* too there was great excitement. After long discussions they too decided to go on strike from the next morning. Quite a number of the ratings however did not quite like the idea. But, finally, they were persuaded when all agreed to remain peaceful and not to give way to violent demonstrations. It was only to be a disciplined, dignified and organised protest.

February 20. The morning seemed calm and quiet in Karachi harbour. But suddenly eleven men from HMIS *Hindustan* broke ship and came out on the jetty. For two hours they demonstrated in front of the ship, shouting slogans and raising the demand that their grievances be redressed. In the meantime the entire ship had stopped work.

The Captain finally managed to get the ship's company together and addressed them. He stressed the need of discipline and rebuked them for their "undignified and indisciplined" behaviour. He also wanted to know what their grievances were and why they had taken this sudden, drastic step.

The ratings were not much moved by this speech. They quietly placed their list of demands before him and specially stressed the fact that they were discontented with the behaviour of the First Lieutenant who constantly used insulting language towards them.

The Captain, however, was not willing to accept demands presented to him in this manner and left them with the ultimatum that nothing would be considered unless they got back to work.

The ratings too were adamant. They refused to work unless their demands were met. The ship could not sail. No work was done, but peace prevailed.

In the meantime the *Travancore* too had struck and the news had spread to the shore establishments.

The *Bahadur* ratings were already in a very excited state of mind. They heard that the strike had started already on the ships. This news added to the general excitement but the immediate incident which caused the strike was the issue of rotten *atta* in the morning. The ratings were now beyond control. They demonstrated on the parade ground when the colours were being hoisted and jeered and shouted slogans. Thus the strike began at the *Bahadur*.

The *Chamak* and *Himalaya* were still unaffected, but the tension was great. The whole day passed in indecision and anxiety. What were they to do? What action could they take which would be acceptable to all and yet be effective enough to force the authorities to yield to their demands? The ships were already on strike and the *Bahadur* too; would they remain away from the battle that was growing? Doubts assailed them and they wavered.

Again that night there was a secret meeting at the *Chamak*. Some ratings from the *Himalaya* also attended. After hours of discussion, it was finally decided that they should also come out from the next morning. A charter of demands was drawn up and a programme of action prepared. No officer got to know of this secret meeting. Stealthily the ratings departed to their barracks after the meeting was over.

February 21. It was Karachi's D-day. Just at breakfast-time the *Bahadur* ratings heard that the other two shore

establishments had also joined the strike. They were so elated that they decided that the time for action had come. They rushed out onto the parade ground, tore down the White Ensign and immediately set fire to it. Next they rushed towards the Guard Room. The Executive Officer who had rushed out on hearing the noise tried to prevent them. He was unceremoniously pushed aside.

On reaching the Guard Room they broke open the cells and released the prisoners. From there they went straight to the Regulating Office, pulled out all the files containing the punishment records and destroyed them. After this their urge for destruction inside their own barracks seemed to have been satisfied.

They got together and marched towards the *Chamak*. On the way they raided the High Angle School and lowered the British Flag. The guards of the HAS joined them. Here they picked up lathis and, with anger in their eyes, they marched on towards the *Chamak*. They were bent on getting all forces together to destroy every single symbol of British rule.

At the *Chamak* everything was peaceful. The ratings had refused to go on parade in the morning in spite of the personal intervention of the Duty Officer. But the sudden entry of the *Bahadur* ratings at about 10 a.m. changed the whole atmosphere.

The *Bahadur* boys wanted to destroy the Radar School. The *Chamak* ratings intervened. No destruction would be allowed here. They must remain disciplined and orderly.

"Do not destroy this costly equipment," they said. "It is all ours. When we throw out these hated foreigners and establish our own national government, they will be of use to us."

This satisfied the over-enthusiastic young boys from the *Bahadur*. They however promptly took down the White Ensign. As they did so an officer rushed out with another flag. The boys charged at him. The CO pulled the officer back and told him not to behave in a manner which would provoke an ugly situation.

Just after this someone pointed towards the *Himalaya* and said:

"Look, there is another of those hated flags."

Like a storm they rushed there, took down the flag,

released the prisoners from the cells and, with all the ratings from the *Himalaya*, came back to the *Chamak*.

The leading ratings now organised a meeting to discuss their plan of action. It was decided that they should take a peaceful procession to the city. In order to get to the mainland from Manora island to Karachi, they divided themselves into two groups. About 400 marched to the *Himalaya* and 200 to the *Bahadur*. Those who went to the *Bahadur* could not find any motorboats so they lowered the ordinary sailing boats and prepared to cross over. From the *Himalaya* the ratings managed to get hold of landing-craft and quickly skimmed across the water.

In the meantime things had been moving fast round the *Hindustan*. In the morning, the army authorities had brought up two platoons (about 60 men) of the Baluch Regiment. They were ordered to board the *Hindustan*. They had heard that the ratings were on strike and refused to go into action against them.

The General was informed. He promptly decided to send two platoons of Gurkhas from the 2nd Battalion of the 777 Indian Parachute Brigade. "They are the most dependable troops and fine fighters," he said.

The General was wrong. The Gurkhas too refused to attack their own brothers.

Now British troops were brought in. It was about ten-thirty when two platoons of the Black Watch Regiment appeared on the jetty alongside the *Hindustan*.

The ratings from Manora island had also been followed by some military in a boat. When the landing-craft neared the jetty they realised that something was afoot, so, instead of landing, they made straight for the *Hindustan*. Two batches managed to get in. The third was prevented and diverted by the military.

There were now 600 ratings on the *Hindustan*. The men ordered all the officers except the doctor to leave the ship. The Captain at first refused. Finally he saw that he had no alternative. While going down, however, he fired a shot from his revolver.

This was a signal for the British troops to attack. They attempted to board the ship. The ratings hastily put up a big notice:

"IF YOU WANT TO SAVE YOUR LIVES, DO NOT COME UP."

The tommies realised that there would be opposition and stopped. Within a few minutes, however, they opened up with their light machine-guns.

The *Hindustan* promptly fired back and forced the British soldiers to disperse.

For a few minutes there was a tense silence.

Suddenly, British troops appeared again. They had mounted on to the roof of the Embarkation Headquarters and had now taken cover behind sandbags. They opened fire again. This time they hit the mark. Two ratings fell dead. One of them was a mere lad of sixteen.

Down below, near the jetty, were gathered the port workers. With wonder-struck eyes they followed this exchange of shots. They had heard that the boys in the Navy had struck work, like them, for the redressal of their grievances. They had also heard that in Bombay too a similar fight was going on. But they were afraid for the boys.

They whispered among themselves: "They will kill the boys. We wish we had arms and we could teach the *gore chamre walon* [whiteskins] a lesson."

The *Hindustan* opened up with her 4" guns. Four salvoes were fired within ten minutes. The whole place shook. The brave white soldiers had had enough for the day. They retired. From the docks below came cheers from the workers.

Those ratings from the *Bahadur* jetty who had been trying to get across to Karachi in country-craft were considerably delayed by the firing. It was rather late when they finally managed to reach Karachi. Their procession too came to nothing. They were stopped by British troops on the road to Bulton Market.

It had been decided that they were to remain peaceful; moreover, they were not even armed. So they decided to turn back. They returned to Manora island at about 2 p.m. By this time the ratings who had gone to the *Hindustan* had also returned.

Everyone was highly agitated at the sudden turn of events. They realised that the military authorities were taking no chances and were out to crush them mercilessly. In the evening they held a general meeting of all the ratings of the shore establishments to determine their course of action. Nothing very much emerged, however, from the

meeting beyond a resolution demanding the immediate withdrawal of British troops.

In the ships and the shore establishments the night passed peacefully. On the *Hindustan* scarcely anybody slept. They were anxiously waiting for the dawn, wondering what was going to happen next. When would the British attack again? They were, however, determined to fight as long as they could. In the meantime they had received instructions from the *Narbada* to resist if attacked. They had also heard that the ratings in Castle Barracks were fighting a fierce battle. This gave them strength.

Throughout the night the British military were active. Midnight conferences were held between the local Naval and Army authorities. Finally the plan of assault was made out. Men of the 23 and 159 Regiments, Royal Artillery were called out. 25-pounder and 75-millimetre guns were placed in strategic positions all round the wharf. 3" mortars were also brought up. The whole area was cordoned off by British troops. The wharf was completely surrounded. The Embarkation Headquarters had already been cleared of the men who had gone on strike there.

Round the shore establishments too there was a lot of activity. The armoury of the *Himalaya* was emptied during the night and all arms and ammunition were carried away to some unknown destination. Only the heavy guns, which could not be moved, were left behind. The High Angle School, where high angle firing was taught and where there were many guns, was occupied by British troops.

February 22 opened with British preparations for a final offensive complete. British troops were posted in the neighbourhood of the shore establishments to prevent the ratings from getting together. Thus the *Hindustan* was effectively isolated from all sides. An ultimatum was sent to the ratings calling upon them to surrender unconditionally or face the consequences of a full-scale attack.

The *Hindustan* replied that they were not prepared to tolerate such insolent ultimatums and got ready to fight. They said, however, that they would remain peaceful if they were not attacked.

Soon the ebb tide began and the level of the *Hindustan* gradually fell. When she had reached the lowest level, at

about 10:30 a.m., the British troops suddenly opened fire with all their weapons.

It was a very critical situation. The ratings on the *Hindustan* knew that with the low level of the ship they could not hit back effectively, but they decided to fight back as long as they could. In face of the heavy machine-gun and mortar fire, the gun crews could scarcely approach the guns. Those who dared could not elevate their guns sufficiently, because of the low tide, to bring them on to the target. They were handicapped in every way.

What was more, they were afraid that if their shots went wide there was danger of their hitting the neighbouring village of Keamari, a working-class stronghold.

Still, they fired back, as best as they could. Two of their shells landed close to the General's Office. The old General and his staff had to spend a panicky hour inside trenches.

For twenty-five minutes the unequal battle continued, but it was impossible to continue it much longer. Six of the ratings had been killed, about thirty were wounded, their shots were going wide. It would have been suicide to continue. They decided to surrender.

With bullets still flying all round, a brave young rating, a mere boy, went up on the bridge with a white flag. For a moment the firing stopped, but the gunners were ordered to fire again. A 75-millimetre shell hit the boy with the white flag.

Thus the brave resistance of the *Hindustan* came to an end as the ratings gathered round the fragments of the body of the young martyr.

The British gunners went back saying: "What a heroic resistance! They are heroes and not criminals. It was a dirty job we had. Why did the officer have to blow up that little boy? It was shameful."

In Keamari, the workers whispered: "The poor boys. Why did they surrender? Why did they lay down their weapons? Were they afraid that they would hurt us? What of that! They should have fought to the last. They should not have surrendered."

Tears rolled down their furrowed faces.

British troops now occupied the *Hindustan*. The leading ratings were arrested and removed to Malir Camp that very afternoon.

In the evening a battalion of British paratroopers occupied Manora island and surrounded the establishments. For eighteen days they remained and all the ratings were virtually under arrest.

Thus ended the great Naval strike at Karachi.

♦

Chapter Nine

IN INDIA AND ABROAD

THE RIN strike was not confined to Bombay and Karachi alone, though these two were the main centres of fierce battles and heroic resistance. Within a day or two of the strike breaking out in Bombay it had spread to practically every shore establishment and ship of the RIN in India and even abroad.

Calcutta

In Calcutta the strike lasted for seven days, continuing even after the surrender at Bombay.

There was only one ship in the Port of Calcutta at that time. There was of course the shore establishment, HMIS *Hooghly*, where the strike began. It was on the morning of February 19 that they first got the news of the strike at Bombay. Immediately they decided to come out too.

Hurried activity in the morning, discussions, arguments and decisions made. A Strike Committee was promptly elected and contact established with the ships in port.

The next day passed in getting all the ratings together. Even the WRINS (Women's RIN Service), took part in the strike. They did a wonderful job going round to people who could not make up their minds, persuading them to maintain solidarity and join the strike. Indeed, these girls played a most heroic role during those hectic days.

On the 22nd morning a mass meeting of more than 500 ratings was held. This was to protest against the threatening statement issued by the FOCRIN the previous day. Speaker after speaker rose to give expression to his condemnation of this senseless threat and demanded its withdrawal as a pre-condition to surrender talks.

As in Bombay, feelings ran high and the ratings instinctively felt that they were fighting not only for their own demands but also giving expression to their urge for the freedom of their country. One rating said to a Pressman:

"The pent-up discontent of the RIN ratings against the British atrocities that are being perpetrated all over India, has found expression at last in these strikes at Bombay, Karachi, Madras, Calcutta and elsewhere. Our fight is not merely a fight for bread. It is also a fight for freedom."

The news of the surrender at Bombay and Karachi reached Calcutta on the evening of the 23rd. It was communicated to the strikers but they were determined to continue their own strike.

February 24. At 10 a.m. the ratings assembled again. After a few speeches expressing their determination to continue the struggle till their demands were fulfilled, they passed the following resolution:

"1. We shall continue our strike till the fulfilment of our demands.

"2. The FOCRIN and the so-called senior officers of the British Government have threatened to destroy the Indian Navy. May we ask them to whom does the Navy belong? This is the Indian Navy. It is a national force. The present Government has no right to pass a sentence on it. When a National Government is established the Navy will become its responsibility. It must be clearly understood that we surrendered our lives to the hands of the Government when we joined the service for the defence of our country. To live on the same level as other races is our birthright. We are prepared to sacrifice our lives for the realisation of this right. We request Mr. Attlee not to interfere in this matter. We have got our national leaders for that purpose. The present Government must quit the Indian political scene.

"3. We wish to remind the Government of India again that these threats will only spread the discontent throughout the armed forces.

"4. We express our deepest regard towards the civilians who gave their lives at Bombay and thank the people for their support.

"5. We appeal to our colleagues and the people to continue the struggle."

That night the authorities struck. At 9 p.m. armed soldiers surrounded the camp near Behala.

February 25. The morning found the whole area bristling with military. Hundreds of soldiers with fixed bayonets were all round the camp. Lorried infantry constantly patrolled the area with their rifles and machine-guns at the ready. The ratings were virtually imprisoned in the camp.

For another day the situation remained unchanged. This stage of siege continued. Finally, isolated from each other, vastly outnumbered and unarmed, the ratings could not continue the struggle any longer and late on the 26th they surrendered.

Madras

At Madras there were no ships in the port and the whole Naval base, HMIS *Adyar*, was affected by the strike. Here the strike was really a sympathetic one only and lasted for a day.

When full details of the strike at Bombay were received, the ratings decided to express their sympathy and solidarity. They broke barracks and marched out into the city in a huge procession. Carrying Congress and League flags and shouting revolutionary slogans they marched round the city, expressing their defiance of the authorities and their solidarity with the ratings of Bombay and Karachi.

Vizagapatam

The ships affected here were HMIS *Sonavati*, *Ahmedabad*, *Shillong* and the HDMC Flotilla.

The strike began first in the Naval Base. When the ratings heard the news of the happenings in Bombay they banded together and decided to join the fight. The first expression of the decision was the pulling down of the White Ensign.

The men then rushed out of the barracks and raided the jetty. From here they called upon the ratings on the *Sonavati* and *Ahmedabad* to join them. They seized a few

motorboats and came ashore. When all were gathered together on the shore they marched out in a procession to the city, waving Congress and League flags in front of them and shouting revolutionary slogans. Ultimately they were rounded up by the military and confined in a camp.

Cochin

The Cochin harbour was full of RN ships. At the base establishment, HMIS *Venduruthy*, the news of the strike reached only on the 22nd. The ratings immediately declared a hunger-strike. Later in the day, HMIS *Baroda*, a mine-sweeper, arrived from Colombo. Contact was established between the two ships and they jointly continued the strike.

On the 22nd a meeting was held on Willingdon Island. It was very disciplined and orderly. In the midst of loud slogans the ratings condemned the British military action against Castle Barracks and demanded the withdrawal of the threatening statement by the FOCRIN.

The ratings, however, quietly went back to work on receipt of news that the Bombay ratings had surrendered.

Jamnagar

The Naval strike spread even to establishments in the states. HMIS *Valsura* is a shore establishment at Jamnagar in Kathiawar. It was the torpedo training school of the RIN. There were some 326 ratings there, quite a number of whom were educated and had some amount of technical training.

The news of the strike at Bombay came through on February 19. The immediate reaction was that something should be done but, when they got down to discuss the details, great difficulties arose. A large number of the ratings were politically conscious and had definite party leanings. The political groups began to pull one against the other. It was obvious to everyone that unless they were united there was no point in starting a struggle. For two days interminable discussions continued.

Finally, on the afternoon of the 21st, a deputation of the ratings appealed to the CO to send a message to the *Talwar* expressing the sympathy of the ratings of the *Valsura* with their struggle. The CO, of course, refused.

Shortly after, that evening, they heard Godfrey's

threatening broadcast over the wireless. The tone of the speech and the threat of the destruction of the Navy angered the ratings. What annoyed them most however was the direct reference to HMIS *Valsura* as having remained loyal.

The ratings immediately decided to go on strike. Next morning they refused to go to work but remained peacefully in the barracks. They, however, pulled down the White Ensign and hoisted the Congress, League and Red Flags.

The authorities also acted quite promptly. They posted police and military guards round the whole camp, preventing the ratings from going out or coming in.

This provoked the men into further action and, on the 23rd, they declared a hunger-strike. They had been continually demanding of the CO that he should broadcast their message of sympathy to all ships and establishments. With the hunger-strike, the situation became serious and the CO agreed to the demand of the ratings. Shortly after, came the news of the intervention of Sardar Patel. The ratings were enraged. In a moment, all political differences were forgotten. The joint struggle for the last two days had dispelled mutual suspicions and brought them together. Unanimously, they declared formally to withdraw their allegiance to the Congress and the League, who had not come out to support their struggle.

The Congress and League Flags were pulled down and only the Red Flag was kept flying. "After all," they said, "the Communist Party is the only political organisation which has stood by us from the beginning."

Three hours later came the news of the surrender.

Now it was all over. They saw that there was no point in continuing a lone battle but they were very bitter and disappointed. Ultimately, after long discussion, they too decided to surrender.

Victimisation followed and seven men were arrested as ring-leaders. The ratings were tortured to get them to mention the names of their leaders. They maintained that they were all leaders. For hours they were made to sit in the scorching sun with no cover over their heads to force them to betray their leaders but not a man spoke a word. They continued to maintain that they were all leaders.

Finally, the authorities had to choose some themselves. They knew that unless they got the help of the

ratings they could not make out a case against many people, so they picked up three, 'appointed' them leaders of the strike and sent them up for court-martial.

Delhi

HMIS *India*, at New Delhi, was a very small establishment, containing mainly signal and other ratings connected with NHQ. They too struck work and peacefully demonstrated their solidarity with their brothers all over India.

Overseas

Indian ratings overseas also responded spontaneously to the call of their brothers at home. At Aden, forty-eight ratings left the station and went on a hunger-strike in sympathy with their fellow-ratings at Bombay. It was a silent and disciplined protest.

In the Andamans, seven ships of the 37th Minesweeping Flotilla were affected—*Rohilkhand*, *Deccan*, *Bengal*, *Carnatic*, *Bihar*, *Kistna* and *Baluchistan*.

The total number of ships affected all over India and abroad were seventy-eight and the number of shore establishments, twenty. Indeed, for two days at least, the strike was practically complete, affecting over 20,000 ratings and a number of Indian officers as well.

Chapter Ten

A SHIP AT SEA

ON February 18 there was one Indian Navy ship at Colombo, HMIS *Baroda*, a minesweeper. It was due to leave for Bombay the next morning. Everyone on the ship was busy preparing for departure.

At 9:30 p.m. one of the Communication ratings having nothing special to do, turned his wireless set to the BBC to listen to the news. He heard that the ratings of HMIS *Talwar* at Bombay had gone on strike.

He immediately rushed to his comrades and gave them the news. From lip to lip the news passed: "*Talwar* on strike."

To some the word conveyed no sense, they did not even know what the word meant. Two of the leading ratings immediately contacted the few politically-conscious men on the ship to discuss the situation. They explained to the others why such a strike had taken place and the necessity to support their comrades. After all the *Talwar* boys were really fighting against the oppression and tyranny from which they had all been suffering so long.

At eleven, a secret meeting was arranged, attended by seventy-five of the one hundred ratings on board. The Petty Officers stayed away and were not even informed. Only one of them knew what was going on, but even though he had no sympathy for the move, he did not dare to inform the officers because he was afraid of the ratings.

Two of the leading ratings who had taken the initiative in calling the meeting addressed the gathering. One of them said:

"A strike in one establishment of the RIN means a fight for all of us. The ratings of the *Talwar* are not only fighting for themselves but for all of us. They are fighting to end the rule of tyranny, racial discrimination and bad

conditions in the whole of the RIN. We must at least stand behind them."

Another spoke, explaining the real cause of the strike. He recalled the number of times they had suffered humiliations at the hands of their white officers and gave concrete examples of their grievances about inadequate pay, bad food and ill treatment.

"It was to fight against these injustices," he said, "that the *Talwar* ratings have gone on strike. At the moment we have got no details of what has actually happened. It is our primary task to follow the news on the wireless carefully and do what the other ships and establishments do."

Now some light was dawning on the ratings. They began to realise what it was all about. But still they were not sure as to what they should do. What did a strike mean after all? What were they expected to do? These questions still remained unanswered. Most of the ratings were of the opinion that as they could not yet make up their minds what to do, the decision should be postponed. In the meantime they could talk it over among themselves and think about the steps that they should take.

Nobody slept that night. They all felt that they were face to face with a crisis that they had never known before. Individually and in groups, they all tried to grasp the situation and decide upon a course of action.

Those who had been able to make up their minds started an explanatory campaign. All had to be won over to one course of action and something had to be done. They tried to explain to their comrades what was at stake. A Pathan rating was itching for a fight. He was the most active. He first went to his own countrymen and violently argued with them for a long time. It was a fight he explained, a fight against those who had insulted them. Could a Pathan take insults lying down?

Everywhere there was great excitement and an ardent desire to understand what all this meant. Gradually, one idea began to dawn on their minds: They were getting ready to fight.

One of the leading ratings got the Communications staff together and asked them to follow the news carefully. They were warned not to say anything to the others. The

situation was now so delicate that any news might excite the ratings and lead to premature action.

In the early hours of the morning some of the ratings met in a conference. It was now certain that all the men on board were ready for action so the situation had to be discussed and a proper programme drawn up.

The problems were many. The ship was due to sail. If it did actually sail, could they start a struggle on the high seas? They all agreed that it would be foolish to do so. As it was, they did not have enough rations or water to last them their trip to Bombay. If the officers scented any trouble they would certainly try to starve them into submission.

If the sailing orders were not cancelled they would have to wait till they reached some port. Then they could go on strike. If, however, the ship did not set sail they could meet again and decide what steps to take.

This decision was circulated to all the ratings.

As day dawned it became evident to the ratings that the officers had no intention of cancelling the sailing orders. They also saw that the officers did not arrange for more rations or water. The officers probably thought that if there was any trouble, it would help them to tide it over to starve the men.

At 9:30 a.m. the ship set sail. Everything seemed normal but the mood of the ratings found expression in the fact that they did not put up the White Ensign when they set sail. This was an indication to the officers that all was not well but they thought it prudent to ignore it. They, however, wanted to keep the news of the development of the RIN strike elsewhere from the ratings, so they quietly removed the wireless set from the mess deck to the First Lieutenant's cabin.

According to Standing Orders men were not normally permitted to enter officers' cabins. But when the ratings discovered that the radio had been removed they went in a body to the First Lieutenant's cabin to listen to it.

The officer threatened them with severe punishment for breaking Standing Orders. The men were not in the least disturbed; they calmly demanded that the radio should be returned to them. The First Lieutenant said that he had brought the wireless set to his cabin to repair it. Even that could not put off the men. They said that they could

repair it themselves. In any case the officer had no right to take away their radio set.

So there they sat, those who had no other work to do. The wireless was kept on continuously and news bulletins poured out at regular intervals. The midday news bulletin brought them the news that the strike had spread to all ships and establishments in Bombay. The ratings were very excited and wanted to go on strike immediately. They were however persuaded not to do anything rash.

They agreed to postpone the strike, but refused to do any extra work. The cooks refused to cook for the officers and they had to cook their own meals.

At 7 p.m. came a signal from NHQ ordering European officers to abandon ships. There were two British officers on board. They became very panicky. They did not know what to do. The ship was in mid-sea, there was nowhere they could go, so they went up into the Captain's cabin, armed themselves with fully-loaded revolvers and never came down again.

The three Indian officers were rather amused at the turn of events and laughed quite openly. But they stayed away from the men, not even speaking to them. They too were afraid. Lt. Rashid, the gunnery officer, had taken care to lock up the magazine and conveniently lose the keys as was revealed when some ratings asked him for them to enable them to clean the weapons.

In the evening a signal was received from the *Narbada* giving them the latest report on the strike situation at Bombay.

During the night the ratings decided to keep themselves ready for any eventualities. To them the locking up of the magazine was not without significance. They decided to get instruments ready to open the magazine if there was any necessity to fight. Hack-saws, hammers and chisels were collected and kept handy.

February 20. The ship calmly sailed across the waters, towards Bombay. There was no further trouble but a tense atmosphere prevailed on board. There were no parades, the ratings carried out their normal duties, those who had nothing specific to do just sat about and discussed the latest news about the strike. Signals kept pouring in from the *Narbada* giving them the latest reports.

February 21. In the morning, a signal came from the C-in-C, Far Eastern Fleet, ordering the ship to proceed to Cochin instead of Bombay. The ratings immediately felt that there must be some trouble at Bombay. But they did not mind where they went. As soon as they reached port they were going to go on strike as sure as anything.

Later in the day they received the news of the attack on Castle Barracks and were considerably agitated. Their determination to fight became stronger, but the final incident that wiped out all vacillations and doubts was the broadcast of the FOCRIN. Godfrey's threat to destroy the Navy helped the waverers to make up their minds and increased the determination of every single rating to fight as soon as they got the chance.

The night passed quietly.

At 10:30 in the morning they reached the entrance to Cochin harbour. The ship stopped there. Shortly afterwards the CO of the *Venduruthy*, the Naval Base, arrived by boat. He seemed to be in a state of panic and had his whole family with him. He walked straight to the Captain's cabin and spent nearly two hours there.

The ratings at once realised that all was not well at the *Venduruthy*. They anxiously waited to reach the harbour so that they could get news of what was happening in Cochin.

At about 12:30, HMIS *Baroda* entered Cochin. The CO of the *Venduruthy* went back about half an hour later.

By this time, for all practical purposes, the ship was in the hands of the ratings. A strike was declared as soon as the ship was berthed in the harbour. They wanted to establish contact with the *Venduruthy* and sent a messenger out to find out what the situation was.

The messenger returned shortly and brought back the news that the ratings on the *Venduruthy* were on hunger strike. They had also advised the *Baroda* ratings to do the same. He had also heard that the workers in the city were demonstrating in sympathy with the strikers. A second messenger was sent to the city to bring back a report on the reactions among the people.

At about 2 p.m., the Captain sent round an order asking the ratings to be ready for an inspection by the Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC) and the Area Commander. As all

duties had been abandoned the ratings just ignored the order.

As there had been generally no disturbance of peace on board the Captain had expected to present a very orderly ship and thus get credit for having maintained order and discipline. Now he was afraid that he would get into trouble with the authorities.

At three, the NOIC and Area Commander arrived with their party of officers. One of the British officers met them and took them straight to the Captain's cabin. The inspection had been abandoned. The Captain informed the Area Commander that all was well but that the men were not in a mood for inspections.

An atmosphere of order and quiet was produced by the Indian officers obligingly playing the role of cooks and stewards in the officers' mess. They had dressed themselves up as ratings and even spoke to the Area Commander and the NOIC in Urdu.

The Brigadier, however, insisted on having an inspection. It would be bad for morale, he said, to abandon it. The First Lieutenant rushed to the men to plead with them to be good boys and to get on parade.

"For God's sake," he said, "come on parade and save the Captain! So far all has been well. You have behaved well. Don't let us down now. You will only get us into trouble."

All this had no effect whatsoever on the ratings. Their curt reply was:

"We don't care. The Area Commander can come here if he is so anxious to see us!"

So the Area Commander and his party had to leave without inspecting the ratings and without giving them a "*sabash*" for having been so "disciplined". From a distance he gave them an angry look and departed.

In the meantime the messenger who had been sent to the city returned. He brought back inspiring stories of strikes and demonstrations in the city in support of the RIN strike. The workers of Cochin harbour had struck work. Everywhere there was tremendous enthusiasm among the people. The RIN ratings were looked upon as great heroes of the freedom struggle.

The men felt very elated. At seven that evening a meeting was called of all the ratings to discuss the latest

strike situation and the further steps that required to be taken. Now that the doubts of the ratings had been removed, they came forward with all sorts of suggestions in order to continue the struggle and to take it to a higher pitch.

The Venduruthy boys were on hunger-strike. Why should not they do the same? After all they had received a message from ashore asking them to take such a step.

The Pathans were, of course, very militant. They were anxious to fight and did not believe in hunger-strikes. One of them said:

"Why should we go on hunger-strikes? Whom does it hurt? Certainly not the British. It only hurts us. Let us eat. We must be fit to carry on our fight. Let us take up arms and kill all these white bastards!"

Others, however, were more balanced. They agreed with the Pathans that they should not go on hunger-strike. They should eat and continue the struggle and fight if the British attacked them. It would be foolish to take the offensive. They were all alone and the whole harbour was full of well-armed RN ships. It would be suicidal to take on such stiff opposition. Why, they were not even adequately armed for such a fight. They had only one 12-pounder and eight anti-aircraft guns. Of course they had plenty of small arms, but that would not be of much use against artillery.

Finally it was agreed that they would fight only if they were attacked. They knew that it would be a suicidal fight but they could not surrender without a battle. If attacked they would fight as long as they could. The question of hunger-strike was considered but the decision on it was postponed.

During the night there was hectic preparation for all eventualities. The Communications ratings were asked to keep regular track of the strike news. Guards were posted to watch the movements of the officers. The magazine was broken open and placed under guard. Every step was taken to meet any emergency that might arise.

February 23. The night had passed peacefully and there was no change in the situation in the morning. The feeling of tension and expectancy continued, more so when

the ratings saw all the officers abandoning ship. One Indian officer, however, remained on board.

Late in the day a signal came from the *Narbada* telling the ratings that the strike was over and that all ships and establishments in Bombay had surrendered. The ratings were disappointed and decided to continue their struggle alone.

Gradually they began to realise that it would be useless to continue all by themselves. They also heard that the *Venduruthy* too had surrendered. But they were not prepared to go back to work immediately.

The officers returned in the evening at about five. The First Lieutenant ordered the ratings to fall in. They refused. The Captain came over and, realising that they were not yet in a mood to obey orders, decided not to provoke them. He addressed them just as they were, sitting in small groups scattered over the deck.

"Do not cause further trouble," he said, "if you remain quiet and get back to work, there will be no trouble for you."

The ratings refused to go back to work and nothing more was said about it. The cooks, however, were permitted to begin cooking for the officers.

February 24. Everything went back to normal. The men started work again, rations were drawn and the ship set sail for Bombay.

Chapter Eleven

IN AID OF THE DISTRESSED

MANY an untold story of great heroism and remarkable initiative displayed by the ratings during the RIN strike remains buried behind the iron curtain that hides our so-called "silent service". HMIS *Kathiawad* has such a story to tell.

They were in a port in Morvi State, in Kathiawar when the ratings first heard the story of the RIN strike at Bombay. It was February 21, the historic day when the ratings in Bombay and Karachi took up arms to defend themselves against the attack of the British military.

It was late in the afternoon when the news reached HMIS *Kathiawad*. The ratings were mostly out on 'liberty'. Those who were on board discussed the situation but could not make up their minds as to the steps that should be taken. So they decided to postpone the decision till the others returned.

By midnight all ratings were back on the ship. Some of them had already heard of the strike at Bombay and the news of the fighting agitated them considerably. Some of them were so excited that they wanted to start something at once. They were anxious to pull out the British officers, set fire to flags or do something desperate to give expression to their uncontrollable anger.

They were, however, persuaded to remain calm and help to plan out a proper programme. As they did not want to rouse suspicion they continued their discussions through group meetings. The leading ratings went round from group to group, found out their reactions and finally sat together to formulate a programme of action.

Finally, the following decisions were taken and circulated to all the ratings:

1. As the ship is due to leave port in the morning, we shall go on strike the moment she sets sail.
2. We shall go straight to Bombay, without stopping anywhere.
3. Our demands will be submitted after consultation with the Central Strike Committee at Bombay.

As day dawned, the ratings got busy with their normal work. There was no sign of trouble anywhere. Some got busy cleaning the guns; the Communications ratings were in their office sending and receiving messages; everywhere there was busy activity. The Captain went round the ship and was quite satisfied.

At regular intervals messages poured in from HMIS *Narbada* and other ships on strike. At the signal office they were carefully collected and passed on to the leading ratings.

At 10 a.m. the ship set sail. The strike began at the same time. Only those who had things to do in order to keep the ship moving continued to work. Everything else, like 'clean-ship' and other duties, stopped.

On the seamen's deck they all gathered together to decide the next course of action. The latest situation was explained to all. A signal had been received from the *Hindustan* saying that she had received an ultimatum to surrender and that she was going to fight. Everyone realised that the situation was becoming grave.

While they were discussing what to do, another signal was received from the *Hindustan* saying that fighting had broken out and that they were experiencing great difficulties.

This news upset the ratings considerably. They felt that they must rush to the rescue. What was the use of going to Bombay? There were many ships there. They were all helping each other. But at Karachi, the *Hindustan* was practically alone; she needed help; she had actually asked for help.

Discussions came to an abrupt end and a quick decision was taken. Yes, they would go to the help of the *Hindustan*. Orders were given to clear the lower decks and all the ratings fell in on the forecastle.

In the meantime, political and anti-British slogans had appeared on the walls. Photographs of the national leaders

had also been pasted. In a few minutes the whole appearance of the ship had changed.

The Captain was called from the bridge and asked to face the assembled ratings and listen to their demands. He came, he saw, and he wondered. The peaceful atmosphere of the morning had disappeared, everywhere angry ratings frowned at him, fury in their eyes. He wanted to know why they had assembled like this in defiance of orders. What did they expect him to do?

An angry murmur was all he heard for some time. Then one of them spoke:

"You must take the ship to Karachi!"

It was an order. The tables had turned completely. Now the ratings issued orders and the officers were expected to obey.

It must, however, be said to the credit of the Captain that he did not lose his nerve for a moment. Quietly he explained to them why he could not obey their order.

"I cannot accept your demands," he said. "Never in my whole career in the Service have I disobeyed the orders of my superior officers. How can I do it today? I am not going to do it. My orders are to proceed to Bombay, on the way I have to touch at every port in Kathiawar and that is exactly what I am going to do."

The ratings were furious. This quiet talk could not calm them down. They were not prepared to listen to what the Captain was prepared to do. The ship was in their hands now and the officers must obey their orders. There was no time to lose in futile discussion.

All together they shouted: "We want to go to Karachi! We want to go to Karachi! Our brothers are dying there and you give us a lecture on obedience! Do what you are told!"

Once again the Captain repeated what he had said before and quietly walked away.

Now there was no holding them back. There was only one thing in their minds: the ratings in the *Hindustan* were in danger, they must go to their aid. In fury they pulled down the White Ensign, tore it into bits and threw it into the water. Some rushed to the magazine to collect arms and ammunition. The ship was theirs, they were going to keep it even if it was necessary to use arms. They

must go to Karachi. They went to the bridge and presented an ultimatum to the Captain.

"Either take us to Karachi or we take over complete control of the ship."

From down below came the deafening shouts of the other ratings, busy arming themselves.

"Inquilab Zindabad!" ... "We are going to Karachi!" "Jai Hind!" ... "With our lives we shall defend our brothers!" ... and so on.

Shouting at the top of their voices they menacingly rushed up to the bridge. The leading ratings stood between the officers and the infuriated ratings. Once more they asked the Captain to take them to Karachi. Again he refused.

He looked at the angry faces of the armed ratings that surrounded him and pointed their rifles at him. "It seems," he said, "that you will go to Karachi in spite of what I might say. You are even determined to use physical force. Well, nothing can deter me from my decision. Do what you like. But you must realise that you shall have to face the consequences."

"We do not want to use force. All we want is to go to Karachi. We assure you that if you take us there nothing will happen on the way. There will be no trouble at all. There is no time to waste, we must go to Karachi."

Once again he refused.

"Well then," one of the leading ratings said, "you had better retire into your ward-room with your officers. Do not dare to come out. You see how angry the ratings are. We shall not be responsible for the consequences if you come out of the ward-room. From now on you have no command over the ship. We command HMIS *Kathiawad*."

The ratings cheered. Over the roar of the strong wind and the waves, rose the voices of the ratings.

"Inquilab Zindabad!" ... "On to Karachi!" ... "The *Kathiawad* is ours!"

The Captain ordered all the officers to retire into the ward-room. Before going in himself he said:

"One of you must come forward to take charge of the ship, one of you who knows something about navigation. Then you can take her anywhere you like."

"You get into your ward-room," came the reply, "you don't have to bother about navigation. Don't you realise

that you have been deprived of your command? It is we who command here."

Quietly the Captain departed.

Immediately the ship's course was changed. At the moment she was going towards Veerawal, a port in Junagadh. Now she headed straight for Karachi. At the speed at which she was travelling, it would have taken them at least 26 hours to reach Karachi.

Once again the leading ratings got together. They had to reach Karachi as soon as possible. It was obvious that alone the *Hindustan* could not hold out for 26 hours. Every moment was of value. Quite a lot of time had already been wasted arguing with that wooden-headed Captain, now there was not a moment to lose.

The ratings in the engine room were consulted and they decided to work both the engines. The ship quickly gathered speed and darted forward in her mission of succour. The speed was now 16 nautical miles per hour. They calculated that at this rate they would take at least 16 to 17 hours. But there was nothing more they could do.

A further difficulty arose. This was going to be a non-stop voyage. But they had only one rating who knew how to navigate the ship. This meant that he would have to be a full sixteen hours on the job. This was not possible. A man could possibly carry on for about eight hours at the most. At this speed the strain would be great. He was bound to collapse after that. An expert hand was needed. They decided to ask one of the Indian officers to come out and help.

Some of the ratings went to the ward-room and asked the Captain to let them have the services of one of the Indian officers. He agreed. The officers were ordered to fall in on the quarter-deck.

The ship was tossing and pitching. It was difficult to stand on deck. They had to catch hold of the railings to steady themselves. The officers were quite panicky. They were afraid that there was going to be some disaster. They could not keep up this speed for long.

Lt. Pal addressed the ratings in Hindustani. He advised them to remain calm and not to take part in senseless activities. What could they do, after all, in Karachi? He asked them to hand over the command of the ship to

the Captain and give up this mad idea of going to Karachi and proceed quietly to Bombay.

The ratings were not in a mood to listen to all this talk. They had decided to go to Karachi and they were going there whether the officers helped them or not.

Realising that it was useless trying to get help from the officers, they decided to carry on themselves as best they could. The rating who was navigating said:

"Never mind, I will take you there, even if it means that I have to give my life for it. Why do you go and ask these officers? What do they care for us or for our brothers facing death at Karachi? Don't go to them again."

For some time more the ship surged through the angry waves.

At one in the afternoon they caught on the wireless the signal sent by the *Hindustan* to the FOCRIN intimating that they had surrendered after a battle lasting twenty-five minutes, and that British troops had taken possession of the ship.

The situation was now changed. Once more the ratings met to decide the next step. They felt that if only they had known earlier, if only they had not wasted time negotiating with the Captain, they might have been able to reach Karachi in time to change the course of events. Sadly and bitterly they discussed the lost opportunities and sighed over the might-have-beens. But what next?

It was pointless going to Karachi now. It was all over there. Now they could go back to their original decision to proceed to Bombay with all speed. The struggle was still continuing there and they could still join their comrades in the struggle. As they were going to Bombay there was no reason why the Captain should not be given back formal command of the ship, as far as the question of navigation was concerned. Of course he must agree to take the ship straight to Bombay.

So, once again, they approached the Captain. He agreed to go straight to Bombay without stopping anywhere. At last the ratings had persuaded him to do what he had never done in his whole Naval career—disobey the command of a superior officer.

Thus peace was once again restored and the ship about-turned and headed for Bombay.

The ratings, however, were still on strike. The ship

was kept moving and that was all. No other work was done. They sat about on deck and for once in their lives had a bit of rest.

Some gathered on the forecastle and sang patriotic songs. A mellow young voice, full of emotion, sang the following words from a song by the great Josh Malihabadi:

*"Kaam hai mera taghayyur, nam hai mera shabab,
Mera nara inquilab-o-inquilab-o-inquilab." **

These verses appealed to the ratings in their present mood of revolt and soon they all picked them up, and everyone began to sing this song of the revolution.

The rest of the day passed peacefully. The ship sailed on towards Bombay. The night was quiet.

February 23. HMIS *Kathiawad* was now near Bombay. The Communications ratings reported that RN cruisers were on patrol duty round Bombay. All ships were being prevented from entering the harbour.

The ratings were determined to get to Bombay and decided to fight their way through, if necessary. Once again the arms were collected, ammunition distributed, jobs divided, and ratings sent to strategic positions. The gun-crews were asked to be ready. Every preparation was made for a battle. Yes, they would fight their way through to Bombay and join their comrades there.

As soon as the *Kathiawad* entered Bombay waters she received a message from the FOB ordering her to anchor 15 miles away from the lighthouse. The ratings ordered the Captain to ignore the order of the FOB. For some time he argued. But when he saw the armed preparations of the ratings, once again he yielded. Once again the Captain disobeyed the orders of his superior officer.

As soon as the *Kathiawad* moved towards Bombay harbour the RN cruiser, *Glasgow*, quickly closed in and turned her guns on her. But the ratings were ready. Their guns too turned towards the *Glasgow*. The *Kathiawad* did not stop. She sped past the wonder-struck cruiser and entered Bombay harbour.

* "My job is to change, my name is youth, My Slogan is Revolution! Revolution! Revolution!"

At 10:30 a.m. the *Kathiawad* entered Bombay. On the bridge, beside the Captain stood a number of ratings. It was going to be the triumphant entry of the first Indian ship commanded by Indian ratings into Bombay harbour.

But what was this? Black flags and White Ensigns on every ship?

What could be the meaning of this? Where were the national flags, the flags of the patriotic parties which they had been told about and which they expected to see proudly fluttering in the breeze?

It did not take them long to realise that it was all over. They had come too late. They now realised why they had not received any reply to the repeated signals that they had sent to the *Narbada* that morning.

Now they became uneasy about the whole thing, they did not know what to do. Some wanted to continue the strike. They wanted to bring back new hope to the ratings in Bombay. What did it matter if they were annihilated? It would give new courage to the ratings in Bombay and they would fight again with fresh energy.

But this was only useless talk. It could lead to nothing. And they knew it as they said it. The hopelessness of the situation was evident. They quietly awaited events.

Very soon British troops came and took possession of the ship. The strike was over.

Thus ended the first historic trip of an Indian ship commanded by Indian ratings in a mission of aid to distressed comrades.

Chapter Twelve

SOLDIERS AND AIRMEN ANSWER THE CALL

THE RIAF strike which had preceded the RIN strike had been equally widespread. It had not, however, attracted such India-wide attention because it had been tactfully handled and suppressed before it could spread to the other arms of the Services.

The RIN strike burst on the country like a mountain flood. It swept away before it all obstacles. Naturally the other arms of the Services were also inspired by the heroic action of their brothers in the Navy. They too had been suffering similar hardships for a long time. Discontent both in the Army and the Air Force was equally widespread. Naturally soldiers and airmen enthusiastically answered the call of the RIN ratings.

One of the earliest units to come to the aid of their Naval brothers in Bombay were the Indian Airmen from RIAF camps at Marine Drive and Andheri, in Bombay. On February 21, while fierce fighting raged in Bombay harbour and the ratings of Castle Barracks fought for their very lives, these brave airmen came out on strike to express their sympathy and solidarity with them.

With a white flag, with blood-stains on it, the airmen marched through the streets of Bombay. They shouted revolutionary slogans and expressed their support to the RIN strike. While the people themselves were preparing to join hands with the ratings for a common struggle against the British, this demonstration was received with tremendous enthusiasm in the city.

On the same day, at Kurla, near Bombay, as described earlier, an RIASC unit struck work. That evening they marched to the nearest Naval barracks at HMIS Akbar and

promised the ratings there to help them in every way possible.

The refusal of Indian troops at Bombay and Karachi to shoot at their brothers in the Navy is quite well known. But there are many other stories of heroic action by Indian soldiers and airmen in support of the RIN strike which lie hidden in the secret information circulars at GHQ.

But some stories have found their way to light.

At Calcutta, the 1386 Indian Pioneer Company came out on strike just after the RIN ratings surrendered at Bombay.

Part of the 24 Indian Pioneer Group, this company was stationed at Majerhat near Behala. For some time the men had been utterly disgusted with life. The war had been over nearly a year and they were anxious to get back home. But there seemed no chance of that. There still seemed enough work for them to do. There were the daily parades in full kit and no change in the hidebound routine of war-time. Apart from this, living conditions were bad. They got rations of rotten wheat and rice full of stones and husk. As it was, their pay was insufficient and from that the unit officer collected various unit levies in the name of Company Funds and what not. This money was supposed to be spent for their own welfare and amenities but they only paid and never saw any results.

Discontent against these conditions had been growing for some time. Whispered discussions in groups became quite a common part of their life but they did not quite know what to do.

Then came the RIN strike. The ratings close to their camp also struck work. This was followed by the men of the 1519 Pioneer Company.

Here was a way out the men thought. More discussions, more arguments, and gradually their minds cleared. They had found a way at last.

"We must change this state of affairs," they said. "To live like human beings we must revolt against all injustice."

Most of them were lads from lower middle-class families or from peasant stock. Their lives had always been a hard struggle against heavy odds. They were not afraid of fighting. Throwing their chests out they declared:

"We shall fight. Nothing shall stop us!"

February 24. The whole company fell in for the usual morning parade. It was a solemn affair. The Subedar-Major would call them to attention and hand over the parade to the Company Commander, who would then inspect the parade. Many a sepoy would be punished for petty faults in dress or for not being able to stand steady for so long or on any excuse whatsoever. Then the usual daily routine would start. That was how they lived.

Morning parade passed peacefully. In the afternoon they had to fall in again. Everything seemed normal. The CO came on parade. Then something happened. Together the men declared:

"We refuse to carry on this parade until our grievances are redressed. We declare a strike."

Captain Griffiths, the CO, was astounded.

"Strike! This is mutiny, you idiots!"

"Mutiny then," thundered the sepoys.

Captain Griffiths tried to reason with them, threatened them, but it was all in vain. Their patience had been tried too long and now they were ready to fight or die.

Finally Captain Griffiths asked, "Who is your leader?"

Out stepped a lad of 22, one of the most efficient Non-Commissioned Officers in the unit, liked both by officers and men—Naik Budhan Sahab.

This was another surprise for Captain Griffiths. For a moment he did not know what to say.

Then, calmly, he barked out his orders: "Return your rifles, ammunition and kit to the Quarter Guard."

"We refuse," came the thundering reply from the sepoys.

Budhan was still standing in front of the CO, still as a statue. Captain Griffiths was furious. He slapped Budhan on the face. Budhan struck back. The white officer reeled. He turned round and left the parade ground.

It created a sensation in Calcutta Army circles. A black sepoy dared hit back his white officer! Why, this was undreamt of! The brass-hats were quite perturbed. Phone messages passed to and fro. The matter was reported to the Area Commander.

The General promptly ordered Punjabi and Garhwali troops to be called out to suppress the mutiny. A surprise awaited him: they refused to fight against their own brothers.

In the meantime the Pioneers took up arms and placed their own guards round their camp.

At 1:30 a.m. the Area Commander personally came to the place. He was accompanied by tanks, armoured cars and British infantry in lorries.

Accompanied by his officers, the General approached the gates of the camp. When he was some fifteen yards away, a sharp voice barked out an order: "Halt!" It was Budhan.

Instinctively the party of officers stopped. The Area Commander was struck dumb. For a few seconds nobody spoke. At last one of the officers informed the sepoys that the General Sahib was there and they should let him in.

The sentries answered back that nobody was allowed to enter the camp. Some of the officers rushed to the spot and screamed at Budhan:

"Allow the Area Commander to come in!"

But Budhan was firm in his decision.

Then the inevitable happened. The British troops attacked. Hopelessly outnumbered and with all the armour of the British against them, the sepoys were forced to surrender.

Budhan and others were arrested and sent up for court-martial. At the trial, the fact that he was one of the most efficient NCOs in the unit came up for consideration. The Court gave him a chance to admit his 'mistake' and beg for mercy.

Proudly the peasant lad spurned the offer. Springing to attention and drawing himself up to his full height, he looked the army officers full in the eye and, in a contemptuous voice, said:

"What! I should beg of mercy from my enemy?"

Needless to say Budhan's punishment was the heaviest and he still rots in jail.*

Next door to the lines of the 1386 Indian Pioneer Company lived the men of the 1519 Indian Pioneer Company.

They had gone on strike on February 23. The inspiration came, of course, from the RIN boys of HMIS *Hooghly*

* As pointed out in the Publishers' Note, this was written in 1947. The present position of this brave son of India is not known.
—Publishers.

who had been on strike since the 20th. They formulated their own demands—better rations, better pay, and independence.

On February 24 they heard that their comrades next door had also come out on strike. They were elated.

In the evening they heard that British troops were coming to arrest them. They armed themselves and got ready to fight. As night fell, they expected to hear the sound of firing any moment. Nothing happened till after midnight.

British troops surrounded their camps too as they surrounded the barracks of the 1386 Company.

The sepoys got ready to fight but the CO of the British troops did not give the order to fire. Instead, a small tank crawled up towards the gate. Havildar Krishnan gave the order: "Ready!"

Immediately the officer said: "We do not intend to shoot. Let us come in. We want to speak to you."

After hurried consultations, seven senior officers were allowed to enter the camp. In the meantime sounds of firing came from the neighbouring camp.

The officers were promptly ordered to point their rifles to the ground when entering the camp. Reluctantly they obeyed the orders of the sepoys.

The Company Commander of the unit asked the sepoys to give the authorities more time to consider their demands. They agreed. They were requested to remain peaceful in the meantime. They gave their word of honour.

For the next two days nothing happened. The 1,500 men of the unit waited anxiously for something to happen. They did not realise that they had been tricked into submission.

February 27. News came in that the RIN ratings had surrendered.

The CO came and ordered two platoons to move immediately to Panagarh and the third to Kanchrapara. They were assured that their demands would be considered at their new station. Thus were they tricked into dispersal and isolated from each other.

As soon as they had been effectively dispersed, the leading sepoys were taken to Group Headquarters. Forty-five of them were disarmed and placed under close arrest.

For a month and eighteen days they remained in cells without trial. Finally, on April 16, they were brought before their CO. A farcical trial followed, where the accused were

not even given a chance to defend themselves. Next day they were taken to Alipore Central Jail and handed over to the civil authorities to undergo their sentence.

The RIAF in Bengal were also affected by the RIN strike.

No. 10 Squadron was stationed at Habra, in Jessore. As soon as they heard of the RIN strike the Indian airmen got together and passed a resolution expressing their sympathy with their Naval comrades and condemning the action of the authorities.

On February 25 they placed a charter of demands before their CO. Among other things it stated:

"The situation in the country is getting more and more complicated. All sections of the people are anxious to end the capitalist and imperialist exploitation and lead a free and happy life. The men of the Air Force also take this opportunity of informing our authorities our attitude towards our country and our people. We feel that we have the right to express our feelings on the subject. We place these demands before the authorities so that the dispute may be settled in a peaceful manner with goodwill and cooperation on both sides.

"Both of us know and realise that just demands cannot be suppressed by force. So we have every right to express our opinion on matters of grave importance to the country and to act according to our beliefs.

"The strike of the RIN ratings is a direct result of the foolish actions of the Naval authorities and we are firmly of the opinion that an armed resistance to the ill-treatment meted out to our countrymen by the British forces was absolutely necessary. Accordingly we express our deepest sympathy towards the RIN ratings and demand an immediate and impartial enquiry. In order to improve our relations with the British troops we must be given the same rights and privileges and pay. Our problems must be solved through discussions with our elected representatives."
(Translated.)

What the response of the authorities to this spirited statement was is not known. But it is not difficult to guess. Isolation and disruption, arrests of a few, discharge of the

others and peace restored again. This is how the British have always responded to any struggle that threatened their existence in the country.

* * *

At Karachi the strike of the RIN ratings created quite a stir among the Indian troops stationed there.

One of the first units to be affected was the Embarkation Unit at the docks. It was a very mixed formation, composed of clerks, watchmen and drivers from various arms of the services. The total strength was about eighty to one hundred. They were made up of people from every corner of India, of practically every religious denomination. Further, they were not even armed.

All these difficulties, however, could not stand in the way of their coming to the aid of their comrades in the Navy.

They had heard of the strike at Bombay on February 19 and had spent quite an agitated day. On the 20th evening they came to know that ships and establishments at Karachi too had gone on strike.

A Bengali VCO immediately gathered all the men together and told them what had happened. He discussed with them the action that they should take. It did not take them long to decide. Unanimously they agreed to go on strike from the next morning.

February 21. None of the men reported for duty in the morning. The Embarkation Officer sent a popular Indian officer to find out what had happened. The men presented him with a memorandum for the Embarkation Officer, asking him to intervene to get the demands of the Naval ratings granted immediately. The memorandum also declared that till this was done the men of the Embarkation Unit would remain on hunger-strike.

The Embarkation Officer was 'naturally not quite pleased with the turn of events. He did not consider it possible or desirable to agree to the demands of the strikers. Once more he sent the Indian officer to persuade the men to give up the strike. As he was not quite prepared to trust this officer, he sent along a Eurasian officer with him.

The Indian officer seemed genuinely sympathetic but warned the men that they were only knocking their heads

against a stone wall. Their position was entirely hopeless and they had no chance of success. They would simply be mowed down by the British troops.

This talk had no effect whatsoever. At about two in the afternoon, the men were removed to the Karachi rest camp. Here they were placed under a strong armed guard.

That did not prevent the men from establishing contact with the outside world. The VCO had heard of the British military attack on the *Hindustan*. He wanted the boys to know that he and his men were behind them. The only possible way he could get the news to them was by getting it into the papers. He tried to devise ways and means to deliver the news of their strike to the Press.

A Pathan sepoy volunteered to risk his life to carry the message to the city. Unobserved he scaled the wall and went with the message to the newspaper offices.

When, the next day, the Naval ratings surrendered, the Embarkation Unit followed suit. The VCO was arrested together with a few others and promptly sent up for discharge as undesirables.

In other army units at Karachi there was no strike during these days but the condition had been very grave. Their reactions to gun battles on the 21st and 22nd were very sharp. The situation was electric. Just a spark might have blown up the whole place. Yes, the British Army authorities were sitting on gun powder.

At the headquarters of the 77 Indian Parachute Brigade the morning of February 21 began as any other. Everyone went about his work. Yet there was some feeling of uneasiness as the men wondered what was happening to the RIN boys who were on strike. But that was nothing serious.

The Indian sepoy soon sensed something unusual in the atmosphere. Two BORs were seen fiddling with a wireless set just outside the Brigade Major's office. The British officers and men all looked very grave and disturbed. What was more, they were all fully armed.

There was a feeling of tension everywhere. The guard on the armoury had been doubled. The BORs when questioned about their arms gave evasive replies and increased the doubts and suspicions of the sepoy.

The Brigadier and the Staff Captain were both out. The sepoy recalled that the Brigadier's driver had been called away late at night and had not yet returned.

Within a few minutes the usual calm of the morning disappeared. Everyone felt that something big was happening somewhere nearby. Vaguely they were suspicious that it had something to do with the RIN boys. Their suspicions were confirmed when the drivers received orders to keep their trucks ready to move at short notice. They were absolutely convinced that something was afoot when they saw the Gurkhas of the 2nd Battalion passing by the camp on the way back to their lines.

At about 10 a.m. the Brigadier returned. His driver told the story of the strike of the RIN ratings. He also narrated all the incidents that had taken place during the morning—the refusal of the Baluch and Gurkha troops to fire on the ratings and the repulse of the British troops.

The Gurkhas, on returning to their unit, were lectured by their 'loyal' Subedar-Major. He brought home to them their "disgraceful conduct" in refusing to fire on Indian ratings at the orders of their British officers. It did not seem to have much effect. For again they refused to fire and for quite a few days sulked about in camp. They continued to discuss the undreamt-of behaviour of the RIN boys with fear, admiration and hope. *

In Brigade Headquarters, led by a few VCOs, the men prepared for some sort of action. Everyone seemed to be anxious to join the ratings. Quite a number of them openly expressed their desire to do so. But they all felt that they lacked good leadership and a conception of solid, concerted action. It was difficult to give organised shape to these individual vague feelings.

The men were also afraid to act. There was always the fear of betrayal, of spies among them. One thing however was certain, that they would not fire upon the ratings if they were called upon to do so.

After lunch some of the NCOs approached the VCOs and expressed their desire to raid the armoury and begin their fight against the British. They reported that they had already issued packets of chilly-powder to throw into the eyes of the British soldiers when raiding the armoury.

The men were ready to act but no leadership was forthcoming. The leaders were afraid that their action would

be isolated and would lead to nothing. It was only later that they discovered that the situation had been exactly the same in every unit in the neighbourhood. Each had been waiting for the other to start.

Later in the day it was reported that an incident had occurred at the 33 Squadron, Indian Engineers (a unit composed of Sikhs and Garhwalis). "Jai Hind" had been chalked on the walls of the CO's office. This had provoked the CO to call a meeting of the whole squadron. The meeting assembled but the CO could not make himself heard as the men greeted him with shouts of "Jai Hind" and shuffling of feet. The whole unit had been given extra parades; the armoury had been taken over from the VCO Quartermaster by a British officer.

In the evening messengers went out to every unit from Brigade Headquarters to find out the reactions of the men. The 4th Rajputana Rifles was probably the best known unit stationed in Karachi at the moment. It had formed part of the famous "Red Eagles" 4th Indian Division and had the reputation of being its finest unit. It had a glorious record of fighting in North Africa, Eritrea and Italy.

Naturally such a unit was affected by the spirit of revolt. Except for the senior VCOs, everyone was prepared to fight against the white officers.

Everywhere they waited for a lead, but the leaders vacillated. They could not make up their minds.

But the authorities acted promptly. They knew that if the lead for any disturbance came it would come from Brigade Headquarters so they decided to disrupt the unity of the men there. A Gurkha Havildar-Major who was reputed to have won his rank not because of his merit but because he acted as a spy for the Intelligence Officer, began to spread the story that the Gurkhas of the 2nd Battalion had fired on the ratings.

The IORs were already very excited. This news enraged them and they wanted to have it out with the Gurkhas. One of the VCOs immediately scented what had happened. He called all his leading NCOs and told them to tell the sepoy the truth, that the Gurkhas had actually refused to fire. Next morning a friendly game of basket-ball was arranged and all the sepoy mixed and good feelings were once more restored.

The evening of the 21st was a critical one. A feeling of

excitement and expectation ran through the camp. Everyone expected something to happen that night. People coming from outside were questioned about the state of affairs in other units.

At 10 p.m. the IO made a round of the barracks. As soon as he left a meeting was called to discuss the prospects of a strike in the Brigade. It was reported that the 4th Battalion were ready to join if somebody started something. Reports were also received of the high feelings and actual preparations for a strike in certain local army units.

The general feeling was that Brigade Headquarters should give the lead and others would follow. But the difficulty for Brigade HQ was that the number of men was not sufficient to stand the first attack of the authorities before the others came to their aid. Moreover, the armoury was far away from the men's barracks and it would be difficult to capture it.

Nothing was decided at the meeting. Once again it became quite clear that though the men were anxious to fight, the leaders were not sure of themselves and afraid to give a bold lead. The meeting ended with a decision that if anything started in the night they would rush to the 4th Battalion lines and fight side by side with them.

Just after the meeting had dispersed the IO made a second round, shortly after midnight. It had been a narrow shave.

The night passed peacefully. Nobody could sleep. The tension was too great.

The next morning, the strain of uncertainty seemed visibly to affect everyone. The BORs and British Officers looked disturbed. The sepoys were on edge. In the distance they could hear the sound of gunfire. They realised what was happening but they could do nothing. This helplessness made them suffer terribly.

At 12:30 they saw the gunners returning. The battle was over. They told the sepoys that after a heroic battle the ratings of the *Hindustan* had surrendered.

An hour later, the sepoys silently watched the ten to fifteen lorries carrying arrested ratings pass by their lines to Malir Camp. They were driven round the lines, probably as a warning to the sepoys and then taken to a specially prepared prisoners' cage in the Pathfinders Unit (British).

A fit of depression now overtook the whole camp. The

fight of the Naval ratings at Karachi was over. The men felt that they had lost a great opportunity to strike for the redressal of their grievances. It would not only have helped them but it would have also prevented the authorities from crushing the RIN uprising. They had lost this opportunity because they had not been properly organised, they had been unprepared, they had lacked the courage to step forward. But they did not give up. Every sepoy whispered to himself: "Next Time!" Yes, next time they were not going to let such an opportunity slip. They would get together, get organised from now. Then, when the call came again, they would not be found lacking.

Some more interesting facts were revealed a few days later.

Everyone came to know of the strike at Embarkation Headquarters and they were all very enthused about it. Shortly after, the 10th Indian Division landed at Karachi, fresh from Italy and Greece. They had heard of the Naval uprising and asked eagerly for the full story and wanted to know what the Army had done to support this battle for freedom. They were rather disappointed to learn that their comrades had not been able to give substantial help to the ratings during those critical days.

The most interesting bit of the news came, however, from the Ordnance boys. A 4" armour-piercing shell had landed a few yards from the General's office during the gun duel between the *Hindustan* and the British troops. Luckily for the General it did not go off because it did not hit anything sufficiently hard. The shell was picked up as souvenir by the Deputy Director of the Ordnance Services. He put it in a glass case and kept it in his office, with the following inscription below it:

"RIN MUTINY — FEBRUARY, 1946"

In various other stations in India, the common soldiers responded to the patriotic call of their brothers in the Navy. But by this time the authorities had learnt well how to tackle them. They were prepared and every sign of disturbance was ruthlessly suppressed. Vague reports are available of many such incidents in units of the Indian Armed Forces but the full facts have never been revealed.

The post-RIN wave of strikes in the forces reached a

climax in the great strike of the Indian Army men at Jubulpore. For quite a few days they fought bitterly and rallied the entire people of the city behind them. Ultimately they failed to stand up to the strength of the authorities. It was an isolated action, but similar in militancy to the RIN struggle.

Gradually, the tension wore down, and from reports available today it seems that the discontent has been driven underground. It continued to smoulder, while many hoped that the impending constitutional changes would bring a change in the lot of the Indian Armed Forces and a radical change in their very nature and function.

Chapter Thirteen

FOR A COMMON CAUSE

"For the first time the blood of men in the Services and men in the streets flowed together in a common cause."

—NAVAL CENTRAL STRIKE COMMITTEE

JUST as other arms of the services responded to the call of the RIN strikers, so did the people of India. An unprecedented demonstration of fraternal solidarity spread from city to city till it took on an all-India character.

The three days, February 21-23, 1946, will always be remembered as historic dates in the annals of our freedom movement.

On the 21st, the strike of the ratings reached a high mark. On that day the strikers took up arms to resist the attempts of the British military to drown their peaceful strike in blood.

On the 22nd and 23rd, the workers and the people of Bombay supported the heroic action of these men in defence of their just rights by a complete city-wide hartal and strike.

British military intervention sought to drown the demonstration of the people in blood; but the people and workers exhibited marvels of resourcefulness and resistance and won a moral victory over the terror.

February 21. Already in the forenoon the news of the fighting at Castle Barracks had spread to the people of the city. They had heard with anger of Godfrey's threat to destroy the Navy and seen with their own eyes the preparations of General Lockhart, GOC, Southern Command, to put

that threat into effect. The appeal of the NCSC had also appeared.

In the evening the people gathered at Apollo Bunder to give food and rations to the ratings. Launch after launch left laden with fruit, food and sweets.

The crowds returning from the dockyard clashed with the police in the Kalbadevi area. The police opened fire twice. Late in the night it was known that Sardar Vallabh-bhai Patel had issued a statement saying that there should be no hartal the next day.

The Communist Party had issued a call to the workers and people to observe a general hartal on the 22nd in support of the demands of the Naval ratings and to save them from the threatened destruction. In the evening, the propaganda van of the Communist Party passed through the entire mill area announcing the hartal. Speakers described the heroic action of the Naval boys and the danger they were threatened with. Forty-seven street meetings were held.

It was clear from the mood of the workers that there was going to be a complete hartal the next day. Already workers on night shift in eight mills had struck work. The mill area was quiet that night.

February 22. Large crowds stood at the mill gates. There was no need to picket. Not a wheel turned in a single mill. It was a spontaneous and voluntary exodus, involving over three lakhs of workers.

Processions of workers paraded through the streets shouting slogans. Some of them terminated in meetings in nearby maidans. The demonstrations were peaceful and disciplined, there were no incidents anywhere before the provocative attacks of the military and the police. Then, and only then, did the workers retaliate. The military then let loose a regime of wanton and indiscriminate shooting.

In the Fort area, a procession of dock workers was suddenly driven into by a military lorry, crushing two workers on the spot. The workers rushed forward to rescue their comrades. The police opened fire. Two strikers fell wounded.

The workers were infuriated. Shortly after, two military lorries were burnt at the same spot. This brought the British military on the scene; for two hours they kept up the firing from rifles and tommy-guns, wounding and killing several.

It was the same in various other places, especially in working-class areas, where workers fought back the brutal repression and many were killed or wounded in skirmishes with the police and the military.

By three in the afternoon, the British military lorries were running amok through the streets of Bombay and especially the streets of Parel, the working-class area, firing at crowds without the slightest provocation. They had established themselves at strategic points armed with machine-guns.

At many places, as these lorries, spitting fire, passed by, many people sitting in their homes or shops were hit. Pools of blood reddened whole streets as people were shot down in one heap.

At places, workers fought back. At De Lisle Road they gave frontal battle to a detachment of some one hundred armed police for full three and a half hours. Finally, a military lorry came along and 'peace' was restored.

Thus a day which began with disciplined political demonstrations of the workers and the common people soon became a day of mass slaughter, most of which took place in working-class areas where there were no incidents of looting or hooliganism.

The students, in response to the appeal of the Bombay Students' Union (affiliated to the All-India Students' Federation), had also come out on strike, even boys of the Muslim Students' Federation joined. They marched in processions, collected money for buying food for the ratings. In the South their demonstrations were not interfered with by the police.

In the North the students had to advance in the face of repeated lathi charges. They fought back with their bare fists. Ultimately they were dispersed after a vicious lathi charge.

February 23. Curfew had been clamped on the city of Bombay for the night of the 22nd. Armed military lorries patrolled the grimly silent and empty streets. The workers and the people, with relatives either dead or wounded in the hospitals, sat anxiously counting the hours of the night.

The morning papers brought the news that the ratings had decided to accept the advice of Sardar Patel and to place themselves in the hands of the nation and call off the

strike. But the people and the workers were in no mood to resume work yet, their dead lay in the morgues, the military yet stood in the streets with fixed bayonets.

The workers stayed away from the mills and factories, the shops remained closed. As the day wore on, skirmishes between the police and military on the one hand and the people on the other, began again. The main storm-centres were now the Muslim localities.

There were scenes of brutal military firing as well as of dauntless resistance by the people. Hindus and Muslims, workers and lower-middle-class people banded together behind barricades and fought pitched battles. Sometimes they fought guerrilla fashion; shrill whistles announced the coming of the military and police; the people vanished and stones were showered on the military from hidden places. The military fired at random and then departed. The people appeared again. This was repeated again and again.

During the day the British military fired again and again but the people did not get panicky or confused. They continued to fight back.

Similar conditions continued till the next day. The military resorted to reckless firing and the anger of the people sometimes found vent in pointless acts of destruction. In the evening Congress and League peace brigades came out separately asking the people to go back to work and remain peaceful.

February 24. To protest against the previous day's reign of terror the workers again refused to go to work. Hardly ten or twelve mills worked and they too, partially. The police and military fired at workers at a number of places.

From noon onwards, the police started entering the chawls in working-class areas and began mass arrests. The united resistance of the people had come to an end. Gradually the movement subsided.

A total of nearly 300 were killed and many more wounded during these three days of popular resistance to military and police terror. Nearly a hundred were killed in working-class areas alone.

* * *

The popular upsurge behind the RIN strike was not confined to Bombay alone. Karachi was another storm centre.

On February 22, after a twenty-five-minute gun-battle, HMIS *Hindustan* surrendered. This was followed by mass arrests of the strikers. The news of the battle and the subsequent surrender and arrests spread like wild fire throughout Karachi.

In the evening, the local branch of the Communist Party of India called a public meeting. Some 5,000 people attended. Here the call was given for a general strike and hartal on the following day. It was also announced that the demonstration would culminate in a mass rally at Idgah Maidan.

On February 23 there was complete hartal. By 11 a.m. over 30,000 people—workers, students, lower-middle-class people, Hindus and Muslims, gathered at Idgah Maidan. The District Magistrate hurriedly promulgated Section 144 and three Communist leaders were arrested on the spot.

Heavy police guards were now rushed in but the people refused to move. They were determined to defy the ban. At about 12:30 the police attacked with tear gas. Women from the neighbouring housetops poured water down into the streets below to counteract the effects of the gas.

The people stood up and retaliated with stones. Till 2:15, a running battle continued. Now the police opened fire. Four people immediately fell wounded. Still they refused to move. The people stood their ground. The police fired again. The crowd dispersed to gather again. Stone-throwing too continued.

Towards evening, joint peace vans came out with Congress, League and Communist flags, and persuaded the people to disperse. By this time at least eight people had been killed and twenty-six wounded.

The news of the military attack on the ratings at Bombay and Karachi caused great anger among the people in various cities of India. At ports where the Naval ratings were on strike, the people immediately came to their support.

At Vizagapatam, the Communist Party called a meeting of the citizens on the evening of the 22nd, when news was received of the arrest of 300 ratings in town. The meeting was largely attended. Communist leaders condemned the arrest of the ratings and demanded the immediate redress of their grievances.

A huge demonstration of workers paraded the streets

with posters reading: "Release Arrested Navy Boys", "Concede Their Demands", "Down With Imperialism", "Condemn Firing", and so on.

The authorities reacted to this militant demonstration quite quickly. They replied with indiscriminate arrests. Section 144, banning all processions and demonstrations in sympathy with the strike of local or outside Naval ratings, was imposed on the city. Notices were served on Communist leaders banning all mass activity by them for one month.

At Calcutta too, the entire people rose spontaneously to the support of the RIN ratings.

The Communist Party gave a call for a general strike on February 23. There was an unprecedented response. The protest strike was led by the heroic Calcutta Tramway workers and there was a complete stoppage of all traffic—trams, buses, taxis and even trains. Over a lakh of students and workers came out on the streets.

From early morning the police took the offensive and there were quite a few clashes. But nothing serious developed.

Throughout the day there were demonstrations of workers and students in various parts of the city. Carrying Congress, League and Red Flags, they paraded the streets shouting slogans: "Accept the Demands of the Ratings", "End Police Zoolum", "Congress, League, Communists Unite!"

The demonstrations terminated in a mass rally at Wellington Square. The meeting was addressed by Prof. K. P. Chattopadhyay, the eminent Bengal Congress leader, and Communist leaders.

As the news of the firing on the people at Bombay and Karachi reached other parts of India, the protest strike-wave spread everywhere.

On February 25, there was a general strike and hartal at Ahmedabad. On February 24, propaganda vans of the Communist Party covered about 50,000 people, announcing the strike the following day. Three public meetings were held in the working-class areas. A procession of Harijan workers toured the major working-class localities. Finally a rally of 6000 workers was held at the Kamdar Maidan where the decision to strike was heartily endorsed.

Next morning, in spite of the direct opposition, as elsewhere, of the Congress and the League, 10,000 workers

responded to the call of the Communist Party. No less than eighteen mills were completely closed. The workers paraded in thousands throughout the day. The main procession consisted of some 3,000 workers. In the evening there was a mass rally.

On that very day the entire working class of Trichinopoly demonstrated against the repression let loose on the RIN ratings and the people of Bombay and Karachi.

In the SIR Colony at Golden Rock, 5,000 workers, 500 clerks and 200 sweepers struck work at the call of the Communist Party. A mile-and-a-half-long procession, 5,000 strong, marched through the town. All the shops and hotels of Golden Rock were closed.

Shops, transport and factories closed down in the whole city. Streams of workers' processions came in from all parts. Among them were railway workers, bidi workers, scavengers, bus workers, shop assistants and students, all had struck work.

At noon, a mammoth rally was held in front of the Communist Party office. Nearly one lakh people, mostly workers, gathered to voice their sympathy for the RIN ratings, and their condemnation of military and police atrocities.

It was the same at Madras. On February 25 there was a complete hartal in the city. The Communist Party, jointly with the Madras Provincial Trade Union Congress and representatives of the various trade union organisations in the city, had given the call for a protest general strike. The entire student community also rallied to the call. Both the Madras Students' Organisation (affiliated to the AISF) and the Students' Congress participated in the strike. The railway workers also joined and the train services were completely dislocated.

Processions of students, workers, shopkeepers came from all sides into the city, shouting various slogans. A huge workers' rally was held at the People's Park and many other meetings were held all over the city. Over 15,000 workers marched to attend this meeting at People's Park. In the afternoon, mammoth meetings were held at Tilak Ghat.

The police were offensive and in strength everywhere, and from the very beginning. There were frequent clashes between the police and the people. Near Elliot Road, the

police lathi-charged a crowd who retaliated with stones. At Royapuram, the police opened fire to disperse a crowd attacking a police station. In spite of the firing, the people continued their fight against the police.

Except for one or two incidents, the situation returned to normal the next day. The police opened fire at two different places in the city. Twenty-nine persons were sentenced for participating in the previous day's disturbances.

The next day, February 26, there was a very successful strike at Kanpur. The previous day, Communist propaganda squads had gone out in *ekkas*, bullock carts and on foot to announce the strike and meeting at the Parade Ground. Over 100 street-corner and *hata* meetings were held.

On February 26, over 6,000 workers rallied at the meeting in spite of heavy rain.

At Madurai, on the 27th, at the call of the Communist Party, there was a most successful one-day general strike and hartal in sympathy with the RIN ratings and to condemn the police and military firing in various parts of India.

There was a complete strike of all transport, in all factories, presses, of scavengers, handloom weavers and in the textile mills.

The students also observed hartal. Ninety per cent of the city's shops were closed, as also most hotels and restaurants.

Mass protest meetings were held in the morning. In the evening a worker's demonstration of 5,000 was organised which culminated in a mammoth meeting of 50,000 people.

On the same day the railway workers of Lumding, Assam, struck work. Over 6,000 workers were involved. The strike started exactly at midnight on the 26th and lasted till midnight the following day. There was a complete stoppage of all trains for twenty-four hours.

At Pandua, also in Assam, some 3,000 railway workers observed a strike from four in the afternoon of the 27th till the same time the following day.

All these protest strikes and demonstrations fittingly came to a close with Martyr's Day at Bombay. The Bombay Committee of the Communist Party organised a workers' rally at Kamgar Maidan on March 8, to pay homage to the

300 martyrs of the military firing on those historic three days of February.

A representative from the RIN addressed the gathering. He thanked the workers for their support during their strike and appealed for a Congress, League, Communist United Defence Committee for the defence of the arrested ratings.

The round of struggles seemed to have come to an end. The characteristic features of these struggles had been the fact that at one stroke the isolation between the people and the armed forces had been broken and that everywhere the people, irrespective of whether they were Hindus or Muslims, Congressmen, Leaguers or Communists, workers or middle-classes, rallied to the support of the RIN ratings, often in opposition to the direct instructions of the Congress and the League leaders. It marked a new era of joint struggles.

Chapter Fourteen

FROM PANIC TO TRIUMPHANT REPRESSION

THE RIN Strike threw GHQ into a panic.

When the first news of the strike reached New Delhi, the Principal Staff Officers (PSOs), the big-wigs of GHQ, immediately met at a conference. The C-in-C presided.

To them it was a crisis, the like of which they had never faced before. They had never expected it. As one studies the facts today, it becomes more and more clear that Bombay kept their nerves on edge. That is the only explanation of the indecision and wavering during the first two days which helped the strike to spread. This has also been pointed out by the RIN Enquiry Commission.

Apart from the suddenness of the outburst, the British authorities were afraid that all the political organisations, especially the Congress and the League would make political capital out of it. That was the first thing that had to be handled. The Congress and the League had to be effectively neutralised.

It is most significant that it was while the RIN strike was on that the C-in-C and Mr. Asaf Ali had constant talks about the future of the Armed Forces and the reconstitution of the Defence Consultative Committee to include popular leaders.

Another step taken by the British to neutralise the leaders and even make them oppose the Naval strike was a bigger strategic move. The strike in the *Talwar* started on February 18 and Mr. Attlee rose in the House of Commons to announce that a Cabinet Mission would visit India in the near future to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power.

Once the opposition of the Congress and League leaders to the RIN strike was assured, the military bosses could go

ahead full steam with repression. GHQ planned hard and planned quick.

Publicity was considered a very important factor. The C-in-C was very publicity-conscious; the Naval bosses on the other hand were proverbially secretive. But the C-in-C emphasised the need of placing as much as possible of the official version of the story before the public. He knew well that most of the important newspapers and journalists would not care to write eye-witness accounts if they managed to get the main facts regularly from official sources.

The Public Relations Directorate at GHQ and its various offices all over India were immediately put on a war footing, closed-door meetings were held by the senior officers to plan out the publicity offensive. Messages went flying all over the country ordering all commanding officers to cooperate fully with the local Public Relations Officers to help to keep the Press well informed.

The instructions were simple. The Press must be told everything that they are likely to get hold of anyway. The journalists must be so well catered for that they would prefer to hang around the different headquarters for official 'dope' rather than rush about for eye-witness reports.

At GHQ, a special room was set apart for the journalists. An officer was allotted solely for attending to them. Communiques galore were issued every day. Senior officers remained on night duty, followed events and sent communiques to all important news agencies, even to Tass. A thorough check was kept on all API messages. They were compared with official information and, if necessary, communiques were issued accordingly. In many cases attempts were made to beat the news agencies with the news of the public.

So much for publicity. Then came actual operations. For this purpose a sort of operations headquarters was set up. GHQ took the RIN strike as any other live operation. In this operations headquarters, called the Report Centre, officers of all the three Services were on 24-hours duty. The walls of the room were covered with huge maps showing the location of troops, British and Indian. Little coloured pins marked the strength and location of the various units of the Army in India. Units affected by the strike or considered unreliable were marked separately.

Now the offensive began, significantly enough, only on

February 20, after the publicity arrangements had been made perfect and the fear of intervention by the national leadership had been effectively eliminated. During this time the RIN strike had spread all over India and had assumed serious proportions. Once again GHQ wavered; the military bosses were not quite sure of their strength.

That explains why at Bombay the first sign of the offensive was only an order asking the ratings to remain indoors after a certain hour. It is significant that those found on the streets after that hour were not arrested but merely taken to the *Talwar* and later to Castle Barracks. This move was their first feeler. They wanted to know how the ratings would react to repression.

In this first round Godfrey won. The ratings, instead of opposing his order, obeyed it and found themselves effectively cut off from outside by armed guards. Now the authorities could go ahead. And, next morning, the armed offensive began with the attack on Castle Barracks.

It should be noted here that at Karachi there was no vacillation, no wavering, on the part of the authorities. The strike began on the 20th and the British offensive opened on the 21st. They had learnt their lesson at Bombay and they knew that they could go ahead safely.

Plans moved fast. When on the 21st Godfrey threatened to destroy the Navy, he may not have meant it, but all the forces at his command were being concentrated round Bombay and Karachi. The main plan now was to isolate each centre of resistance and then crush it. That is why the strike lasted for different periods at different places, from two days at Karachi to a week at Calcutta.

At the Report Centre at GHQ there was a real atmosphere of war. A notice board displayed the latest situation, incoming and outgoing signals. There was a constant movement of troops and the pins on the maps moved about fast to show the new positions taken by them. Mainly British troops were being concentrated round the main centres to isolate and crush the resistance. The first targets were Karachi and Bombay. Units of the land, air and sea forces were concentrated round these two cities. Reinforcements were coming from Britain too.

The senior officers with their red tabs and glittering buttons stood fondly looking at the pins that had a story to tell. All the forces at the command of the authorities

to crush the Naval uprising were there before one's eyes. No wonder the Blimps gloated over the picture. Indeed, the Naval ratings seemed to have undertaken a formidable task!

But one had only to follow the incoming signals to see that the task for the British was not quite as easy as it seemed. They were finding it difficult to concentrate their forces. The Indian units were a constant source of trouble. They had not counted on Indian troops refusing to fire, they had not counted on Indian officers of the RIAF refusing to fly. But that is exactly what happened.

The stories of many Indian Army units refusing to fire on the RIN ratings, of transport services refusing to carry British troops who were going to fight against the Naval boys, are well known. What is not known, however, is that an Indian squadron when ordered to provide a flight of planes to proceed to Bombay to bomb the ratings found it difficult to find Indian officers to pilot the planes.

When some officers finally agreed, they proceeded so slowly, conveniently lost their bearings, and finally downed most of the planes midway due to 'engine trouble' so that this offensive failed completely.

All these spokes in the wheel upset the happy plans of GHQ, so much so that the C-in-C had to cancel his tour programme. He had decided to open the first peace-time officers' training course at the Indian Military Academy. Unfortunately, at the last moment, his plans went awry and he had to return from Saharanpur.

Godfrey's senseless broadcast made things rather difficult for his colleagues at New Delhi. The senior staff officers and the C-in-C himself were all rather annoyed. Immediately a Naval Public Relations Officer was sent to Bombay to keep a check on Godfrey's public utterances.

Among the junior officers at GHQ there was quite a lively interest in the RIN strike. The Bombay papers were awaited with anxiety. The *Free Press*, *Blitz* and *People's Age* were avidly read by both British and Indian officers, and more so by the clerks. The *Free Press* headline, "Godfrey Must Go", was highly appreciated by all.

From the evening of the 21st, the people began to get restive at Bombay. Clashes had already begun to develop between the police and military on one side and the people on the other. The unprecedented hartal on the 22nd created fresh panic at GHQ.

Immediately, a special officer was flown to Bombay. He was asked to find traces of communal differences in the disturbances that were taking place.

In the meantime all operations against the ratings were suspended. The national leaders were given a chance to approach the authorities with peace proposals. So far it had been enough if the Congress and the League leaders played a negative role, simply opposing strikes and hartals. But now, with the people leading joint battles on the streets, behind the barricades, it was extremely necessary to get the leaders positively to intervene to prevent a further setback.

While the leaders conferred with the authorities, the special officer from Bombay sent back alarming reports of a remarkable, heroic and united upsurge of the people. He quoted instances of Hindu-Muslim unity and blew up all attempts of the authorities to give a communal turn to the glorious struggle of the common people.

Negotiations were now speeded up. At Delhi, the C-in-C was forced to make an unofficial statement to Maulana Azad, the then Congress President, that there would be no victimisation. And, slowly, the whole machinery of a temporary retreat, with the help of the national leaders, was set in motion. And it worked. The strike was over.

On the 23rd the military offensive on the people of Bombay increased in intensity. The ratings had been made to surrender; the people could now be tackled separately.

Even after the successful manoeuvring leading to the surrender of the ratings, the panic at GHQ persisted. Those few days had shaken them up badly. The Report Centre and the general emergency orders at GHQ continued for another month. The repressive machinery and plans were perfected and came in quite handy during the post-RIN wave of strikes in the Armed Forces.

The tension lasted well up to April.

It was in this atmosphere that the Victory Parade was held at Delhi. The parade had this tension and the aftermath of the RIN strike as its background music. Rather discordant, but the music had to be played. It was the only way to recover the lost prestige or what the Japs call "lost face".

Many officers, both British and Indian, thought it impolitic and senseless to organise such expensive pageantry

at such a time. But the GHQ higher-ups were anxious to have a window-display of their wares to turn the minds of the people off the recent events. Further, they wanted to hide their fears behind the screen of all the pageantry.

The tension and fear continued in spite of everything. There were last-minute changes in the programme and many an Indian serviceman stayed away from the whole function in silent protest.

While the authorities tried to take away the bad taste left by the RIN strike through pageantry like the Delhi Victory Parade and the Burma Victory Pictorial Exhibitions, they let loose merciless repression inside the forces and thoroughly weeded out all militant, patriotic elements from all the three Services, and especially from the RIN. In March and April alone, nearly 5,500 men were demobilised from the RIN. Quite a number of them were discharged with the remark, "Services no longer required", but without the benefits of normal release. Others were discharged as "unsuitable".

Arrests of alleged ringleaders in the Navy began immediately after the surrender. Only two days after the surrender, Khan and the other members of the NCSC were removed to an unknown destination. Nobody knew what was to happen to them. An iron curtain separated them from the people who had risen as one man to support their just struggle.

"We surrendered to India and not to the British. I don't know where they are taking us.

"We shall never give in! Goodbye and good luck."

These are reported to be the last words of Khan to his comrades as he was carried away to detention.

Similar scenes occurred everywhere. At HMIS *Gondwana*, on the morning of February 26, a cook and two seamen were called to the Captain's cabin. They were told that they had been drafted from that ship to another and asked to pack up their kit and be ready to leave by 10 : 30.

They left without knowing that they were being placed under arrest. As soon as they came ashore, they were bundled into a lorry full of armed guards and taken away to a military camp.

Within ten hours some 396 ratings were placed under

arrest in and around Bombay and taken to Mulund military camp in an isolated area in the Thana district of Bombay.

At Karachi, the ratings were arrested immediately after the surrender. They were placed in a barbed-wire cage in the Pathfinder Company lines at Malir Camp. Later, the British guards were reinforced by men from the 4th Rajputana Rifles.

Even in defeat the ratings maintained perfect unity. When the NOIC called up some of them and asked them who the leaders were he could not get any satisfactory reply. Bribes were offered, hopes of pardon and even threats, but they were of no avail. The only answer he got was that they were all leaders.

It was now decided to separate the ratings and approach them separately to disrupt their unity. Two separate camps were built and a third one established in the 16 Punjab Regiment lines. The Commanding Officer of the Boy's Establishment won the confidence of the ratings by his good behaviour but when he tried to use this to get information out of them, he too came up against a stone wall. He asked the leaders to fall out separately but they refused. Then he called out a few names and asked them to fall out separately. Nobody moved for some time. When one of them stepped out the others immediately came and stood beside him.

So now they were divided up in different camps. They were even moved about from one camp to another. Sometimes the Muslims were separated from the Hindus, at other times the divisions were on a provincial basis. After some time these dispersals and divisions on communal and provincial lines had their effect and the unity of the men was affected. The ratings were split but one determination still remained strong: they still refused to betray their comrades.

The Indian guards from the 4th Rajputana Rifles were very popular with the ratings. It was a very common sight to see one of the prisoners following his guard around and inciting him to fight against the white officers and rise to break the chains of slavery. The Indian sepoys realised that at that moment they could do nothing, but they respected and loved these brave comrades of theirs.

The prisoners refused to take food from the Naval

kitchen and demanded that they be given the same food as their Army comrades and that it should be cooked in the kitchen of the Rajputana Rifles. This demand was granted as the cooks of the unit expressed their willingness to cook for them. Actually they took it as a compliment and made great efforts in spite of the extra labour involved.

The sentries too looked after the prisoners well. They kept them well provided with cigarettes; roll calls were never taken, instead they would go up to each person and make sure that he was there.

The officers' mess and quarters were very near the cage. To annoy them the prisoners used to make a lot of noise at night. The White CO of the unit was furious. He threatened to shoot the whole lot of them. He even placed tear- and smoke-gas generators in front of their cells. This caused a great deal of discontent not only among the prisoners but also among the sepoys of the unit. The higher authorities promptly stepped in, pacified the men and immediately appointed a Court of Enquiry.

Thus life continued in the prisoners' cages at Karachi until the authorities decided to dispose of the men one by one. Some 500 had been arrested and placed in these concentration camps at Malir. From the very beginning they tried to make the men express regret and beg for mercy. At first they failed. But after they had successfully disrupted their unity and broken their spirit, it was easy to make a number of them beg for mercy. They were forced to give undertakings that they would never create trouble again.

In this manner, some 350 were released and sent back to their ships or establishments. Some of them, however, were discharged as 'unsuitable' or 'no longer required', in spite of their promises of good behaviour. The rest were tried either by summary courts martial or brought up before their COs and summarily punished.

At Bombay too similar incidents occurred. The Indian sentries were friendly, the authorities tried to disrupt the unity of the ratings, even ill-treated them, carried out summary trials and Boards of Enquiry and finally sentenced or dismissed quite a large number of them. But the ratings fought back at every step.

The story of the struggle of these ratings behind the

barbed-wire of their concentration camp is as inspiring as the story of the RIN strike itself.

Mulund Camp is on the Bombay-Thana road, about three miles from Thana. Situated at the foot of a hill, it was quite isolated from any human habitation. Once it used to be the barracks of the Maratha Regiment. Within a couple of days after the strike the camp was made ready to receive the RIN prisoners.

The arrests of the ratings started on February 25, two days after the surrender, and by the next day more than 100 ratings had been transferred to Mulund Camp. Within a week the number swelled to 390.

Living conditions in the Camp were very bad. The prisoners were accommodated in dirty huts and the sanitary arrangements were not worth the name, latrines were so few that the men had to queue up every morning. It was most uncomfortable and soon began to tell on the health of the ratings and they began to report sick.

Reporting sick was also a process in itself. The ratings were taken to hospital under armed guards; if they were detained in hospital, armed guards were posted there. For all practical purposes they were treated as criminals.

Their amenities were completely neglected. Newspapers were not allowed, so that they were cut off completely from the outside world. They could learn nothing of the popular upsurge that was still continuing all over India behind their demands and in sympathy with their strike.

The food that they were given was very bad; as usual the rice was full of stones and had a horrible smell; rations supplied were inadequate and the cooking bad. It seemed that the authorities were out to make their lives unbearable; they were repeating all the atrocities which led the ratings to come out on strike, repeating them with a vengeance.

They felt rather dispirited too, the whole atmosphere of the concentration camp and all these grievances added to their mental depression. Fondly they looked back to the recent past. Only a few days back, they had been free. Five days they had spent on free ships, with the Congress, League and Red Flags flying instead of the hated White Ensign. For five days those bits of land and water in India had been independent. They had functioned democratically, led by their own elected representatives. The

memory of those five historic days kept haunting them, they could not believe that it was all over, they could not believe that those days would not come back. No, the people were behind them; the leaders had promised to help them; they would once again be free. Fondly they hoped for the best and tried hard to fight the depression that gradually seemed to overtake them.

Shortly after their arrival at the camp, they managed to establish contact with their comrades who had managed to escape arrest. Newspapers were smuggled in past the Maratha guards who were entirely won over to the side of the strikers and were always eager to help.

The prisoners heard that the ratings who were still free were planning to strike again to protest against the indiscriminate arrests. They were rather upset. They were glad to see that their comrades were still spirited and wanted to fight for them but they thought that the time was not ripe for such a struggle. The leading ratings got together, discussed the situation and drafted a letter to all their comrades outside.

"Dear Mates,

"While you may be lacking the details of our life here in the camp, we, on the other hand, are aware of the things you are fated to put up with. We also realise the present restlessness in all places from where we come. We fully appreciate the spirit of solidarity—the great support of which you never failed us in the past, and the present moral support of which we feel mighty proud.

"We further think it necessary at the present moment to remind you of the danger of premature steps to launch a further struggle. We call upon you to hold on with any further initiative until the courts martial or other psychologically correct moment when the whole issue will be up in the forefront of the nation's mind and it will be easiest to rouse the nation.

"Until then your job, plus of those others who are spirited like you in our cause, should be to organise, to keep up the spirit—read literature and prepare for the next struggle (not to be initiated until given a call from here).

"The best you can do is this. The copies of this letter should be circulated to all ships and establishments, telling

them not to be provoked into any senseless, isolated action, which will only result in defeat.

"Let us know at the earliest if you fail to carry this message to all concerned. And indicate the names of those ships and establishments where you have not sent typed copies of this letter.

"Anything that you may think fit to pass to us, you may do so as we have done.

"Your grateful Comrades Behind the Bars,
"N. S. C."

Life, however, continued to grow more and more unbearable in Mulund Camp. The prisoners complained again and again but their complaints fell on deaf ears. No steps were taken to redress their grievances. They soon reached the limit of their patience.

By this time the Boards of Enquiry had started functioning. The COs of different establishments and the Captains of different ships served on these Boards and tried to pin crimes on some of the ratings. It was really a farce, with bogus witnesses and false charges against the prisoners. If the members came upon any evidence that did not suit their purpose they conveniently rejected it. It was all according to plan. Its purpose was to find out the strike leaders and punish them severely. If that failed, pick out some and punish them as an example to the others.

The ratings refused to be bullied into submission. Inside these Boards, facing their officers, they fought back and answered their questions boldly and in a dignified manner. Most of them refused to give any information which was likely to involve any of their comrades.

Even the little boys refused to be unnerved by the mock solemnity of these Boards of Enquiry. Aslam was a boy rating from the *Narbada*. During the preliminary cross examination, a Lt. Colonel shouted at him:

"Make a statement about that strike of yours!"

Promptly the boy replied:

"My statement is that as an Indian I participated in the strike which was started by all Indian Navy men. It was my moral as well as national duty to join the strike."

"I want a detailed statement," growled the Lt. Colonel.

"My detailed statement," came the slow and deliberate

reply, "is that I participated in the strike like all other Indian Navy men. The entire country and the whole world know that we Indian soldiers have made up our minds not to rest as long as this distinction of Black and White is maintained and as long as we are treated as inferiors. The fire of hatred and enmity will go on burning in our hearts and you will know of it when the time comes. Are there any more details to give?"

There was a moment's silence. The officer realised that he was stepping on rather dangerous ground, so he gave the cross-examination a new turn.

"Were you not told of all the regulations when you were recruited? I think you were."

"If you think so, then why do you ask me?"

That put an end to the cross-examination and the prisoner was removed. It was probably on the basis of such an enquiry that this boy was later punished.

Some of the ratings were sent back to their ships and establishments either because nothing could be pinned on them or because they apologised for their behaviour and begged for mercy.

In the meantime, all the prisoners continued to suffer tremendous hardships. They managed to establish contact with the ratings who were free but they had not yet been able to reach the outside public. For days the people of India did not know where the ratings had been taken; nobody knew what was happening to them. Behind an iron curtain they suffered all sorts of hardships.

At last matters came to a head. Disgusted with the conditions, the men decided to protest. On the morning of March 12, nearly three weeks after they had come to the Camp, the crisis came. One of the representatives of the ratings who had come to collect food for his comrades complained to the Petty Officer that the food was not adequate. He was asked to shut up.

"We shall shut up all right," said the rating, "but what about the food?"

He was asked to go and report to the Duty Officer, one Lt. Singh. He went and stood before the officer who did not care to take any notice of him. In exasperation, the rating pushed him and asked him to listen to his complaint.

"You have got to give me my full scale of food just now or we shall take whatever steps we think fit."

The officer turned round, caught hold of his ears and dragged him out of the room. The rating now refused to take the food. He went back to his comrades and told them what had happened. They were furious. They began to record their protest by shouting slogans: "Inquilab Zinda-bad!", "Jai Hind!" ...Khan, the president of the NCSC immediately declared a hunger-strike.

A message was sent round to the others that a strike had been declared and they were all asked to join. Everyone responded to the appeal and refused to take food. The hunger-strike was complete.

From the very beginning things did not go very well. There were differences among the leaders about the strike. Khan's popularity had decreased among the more militant ratings for having negotiated the surrender. He had thought, in the circumstances, he could give a call for a strike and everything would be all right; he did not think of calling a meeting of representatives or of electing a Strike Committee before declaring the strike.

Some of the leaders considered this very high-handed and undemocratic. They also thought that a strike at that time could serve no purpose. After all, the outside world could not get to know anything about it and they would be crushed in isolation. But since the strike had been declared, they decided to stand by the decision and maintain their unity.

What made things really bad, however, was the presence of some agents of the authorities among the prisoners. That they were members of the Naval Security Police was revealed only later. At that time they posed as good friends and comrades. Some of them seemed quite militant, while others advised caution. Some suggested that Khan had started the strike to regain his popularity, others suggested that those who were opposing Khan were afraid of losing their hold over the ratings. Ugly words were flung about and there was considerable confusion and discontent among the ratings.

On the first day, however, these differences did not show up, though a strained feeling was quite visible. The ratings and the leaders acted jointly and promptly. A strike committee was set up and the following charter of demands drawn up:

"1. Lt. Awan Singh must apologise for his insulting behaviour towards one of the ratings.

"2. The quality and quantity of food must be improved.

"3. Permission must be given to establish contact with Press representatives and political leaders.

"4. Permission to get legal assistance.

"5. Impartial Boards of Enquiry."

The CO of the Camp, Capt. Knott, however, did not seem much disturbed by the strike. He did not bother to go to the boys and find out what their troubles were. On the contrary he rang up the FOB and asked for more guards.

The day passed peacefully. In the evening no meals were even offered to the ratings, neither did any of them come forward to take food.

March 13. Everything was quiet and the strikers peaceful. The FOB and a Brigadier visited the Camp, met the strike leaders and wanted to know what their grievances were. The demands were presented to the FOB and he was very clearly told that the strike would continue until the demands were met.

The FOB promised to consider the demands and let them know his decision later.

Just after he left, two Indian officers and the agents of the authorities among the ratings started a propaganda offensive to break the strike. The officers tried to win over the vacillating elements by offering them better food. Some were taken away and talked to separately. The disruptionist ratings began to urge the others to surrender on the basis of the FOB's promise to consider the demands. All these efforts, however, proved futile. The strike continued. But the spirit of resistance of some of the ratings was considerably weakened, especially because the differences between the leaders began to become more obvious.

In the evening the authorities arranged a cinema show. Most of the ratings opposed it and asked the officers not to go on with it. A certain number of the ratings led by the Government spies seemed quite unconcerned about it and went to attend the show when it began. This enraged the others. They began to shout and make a noise.

In spite of the interference, the show continued. At last, the young boy, Aslam, got so agitated that he jumped up and tore the screen. Then there was general pandemonium. The officers ordered the Maratha soldiers to stand by. A curfew was declared within the camp and all the strikers were forced into the barracks.

March 14. At six all the barracks in the camp were suddenly surrounded by British troops. The alleged ring-leaders of the strike were rounded up and removed to another camp some 200 yards away.

Two hours later the rest of the ratings were called and a message from the CO, Capt. Knott, was read out:

"The men who were preventing you from taking meals have all been arrested. You can go now, take your breakfast and start the usual routine."

The ratings were furious. They put forward only one demand: whatever happened, they must be kept together. But they all refused to eat.

In the meantime, in the separate camp, the leaders of the strike got together. It was now clear to all that differences among the leaders and especially among the ratings only meant strengthening the hands of the authorities. It was obvious that the previous night's demonstration of these differences had given the authorities the strength to separate the leaders from the men.

One of the most important points of difference among the leaders had been the question of an isolated struggle. Those who had opposed the strike doubted whether an isolated struggle could end in victory. They argued that as they were cut off from the outside world, no help could come to them and they could easily be crushed in isolation.

Now they saw that the disruptors among the ratings were becoming more active, the repression of the authorities was increasing. Some steps had to be taken to reforge their unity and get help from outside.

They immediately got together and drafted an appeal to all servicemen calling upon them to join their struggle. This was to be sent outside with the help of the Maratha soldiers.

It was nearly eleven when the draft was ready.

"RATINGS OF THE RIN AND FRIENDS OF THE ARMY AND RIAF!

"We, your 390 comrades who were removed to the Mulund Camp for our part in the last struggle of ours, have been on hunger-strike since the morning of last Tuesday.

"We went on hunger-strike because one of our comrades was brutally treated and insulted by an officer and because the food that we are being given is both inadequate and intolerable.

"The FOB came to see us and to persuade us to give up the strike but we told him that we could call off the strike if the officer apologised for his behaviour and if we were given better food, food as good as the food we were receiving before we were transferred to Mulund Camp.

"Since the FOB's departure yesterday morning, the authorities are doing their best to crush our strike. They have segregated a certain number of us and are doing their best to split our ranks by offering fruits, sweets and other delicacies. But we are standing firm and the few who have deserted to the cause of the FOB have nothing to do with the mass of us.

"Today we appeal to you all to help us. Three lorry-loads of British soldiers have been brought to our camp to terrorise us. The Maratha battalion that has been on duty at our camp has been asked to keep all its rifles loaded. The authorities are out to crush us with blood and shooting if necessary.

"You must stand by us.

"We ask all of you, our comrades:

- * Refuse to do any work until our two just demands are conceded.
- * Stand together united behind your work-strike.

"We would also warn you not to resort to hunger-strike. Inside Mulund Camp we, as prisoners, have no other way of struggle. You outside, in the Navy, Army and Air Force, can fight by refusing to do work, while continuing to eat food so that you will have the strength to continue your fight.

"The time has come for us all to fight again. If we stand together there is no doubt that we shall win.

"Warm greetings,

"Strike Committee of Mulund Camp."

This draft had to be circulated to the other ratings before it could be sent outside but the leaders did not even get the chance to approve it themselves, leave alone the rest of the ratings. This appeal never reached its destination, for, within a few minutes of the draft being ready, the authorities attacked again.

About 11 a.m. the military raided the barracks of the segregated ratings and wanted to remove Khan. He refused to go. The military officer was not prepared to listen to him. At bayonet point he bundled Khan into a lorry.

Aslam was among those who were with Khan. He was so infuriated by the sight of the military dragging away the President of their Strike Committee that he rushed towards Capt. Knott, tore off his epaulets and beat him on his face with his shoes.

Capt. Knott reeled before the attack. He ordered the Marathas to open fire. They downed their rifles. They would not fire at their own brothers.

In the meantime the other ratings came out of their barracks. They had heard some noise and were anxious to know what was happening. When they realised what was happening they jumped on to the gate and tried to break it open.

By now British troops had rushed up. They fired a few rounds from their tommy-guns and light machine-guns. The ratings were successfully dispersed.

Capt. Knott now came over to them and tried to pacify them. He said that Khan was being removed under orders from the FOB and he had no hand in the matter. He requested them not to do anything desperate and promised to ring up the FOB and request him to allow him to keep all the ratings together.

Once more the spies got busy. They persuaded the ratings to accept Capt. Knott's suggestion and give up the fight, which they did. But the result was very different from what they had expected. Five lorry-loads of fully-armed British troops came and surrounded the camp. To protest against this action, nine ratings sat in the hot sun and started satyagraha.

In the meantime, a large number of the ratings began to suffer from the effects of continued starvation. The excitement and exertion of the day also had their effect. Quite a few of them fainted and had to be removed to the hospital.

Some 150 had to be removed to the sick bay of Mulund Camp. Some of the cases were very serious and had to be sent to the hospital later in the day. There was still no change in the attitude of the authorities.

The number of strikers sitting in the hot sun swelled to fifty. The authorities ignored their sufferings and continued to carry on their work of Boards of Enquiry and disruption of the unity of the ratings. As a result of the proceedings of the Boards, small batches of ratings continued to be sent back to their units every day. By the 14th nearly thirty-six had left.

In the evening the thirty ratings who had been segregated were removed to Kalyan Military Camp.

The hunger-strike was now at breaking point. The authorities had begun forcible feeding. Some had broken down and taken water. But the more militant ratings still continued.

March 15. Hundreds of Pioneer Corps men poured into the Camp. They started dividing up the Camp into different sectors with wire barriers. In the meantime the Maratha troops had also been replaced. In their place had come a mixed unit composed of men from all provinces. This was to prevent the ratings from winning them over easily. By this time the news of the strike had reached the papers. Some ratings had gone on strike at the *Talwar* but had later been persuaded to resume work. The authorities were now more anxious to prevent news from leaking outside. The Mulund Camp had to be completely sealed off from the public and the strike had to be crushed. Every step was taken to accomplish these tasks.

The ratings at the gate were removed and placed in one of the newly-separated barracks. The rest of the ratings too were divided up into small batches of eight and kept separately and closely guarded. After this effective dispersal the spies got to work. They had full freedom to spread rumours. The average rating was in a depressed state. After four days of starvation, they were physically very weak and could scarcely move about. Cut off from the outside world, separated from their leaders, and without any hope of aid from outside, they could not resist much longer. Finally they surrendered and began to take food.

Some twenty ratings, however, were determined to

continue the strike. Two of them fainted in the course of the day and were removed to the hospital. The others still continued. Gradually they became more and more weak. Their condition was grave. They even resisted forced feeding. At last the CO was moved to activity. He came to them at 9 p.m. and wanted to know what their intentions were. They made it quite clear to Capt. Knott that they would not give up the hunger-strike until and unless they were allowed to go to Kalyan and meet their comrades there.

After a lot of argument the Captain finally agreed to allow two representatives to go to Kalyan. Two men were elected and were sent to Kalyan at about 10 p.m. They returned after midnight with the advice that they should give up the strike. It could serve no purpose now as they were dispersed and could no longer keep in touch with one another to coordinate their activities. So, on the morning of the 16th, the last group of strikers broke fast at Mulund Camp.

The hunger-strike did not end in a victory because of differences among the ratings themselves and because of lack of support from outside. Nevertheless, the authorities seemed to have learnt a lesson, for the food and living conditions improved somewhat in Mulund Camp.

In the meantime, what was happening to those who had been removed to Kalyan?

As soon as the prisoners were brought in, the British guards began to handle them roughly. They were made to "double" about from place to place. After three days of hunger-strike most of them were too weak to run about. Those who could not or refused to run were kicked by their British guards who continued to call them, "Jai Hind bastards".

One of the ratings could not stand this any longer and attacked one of the guards. Though weak, his fury gave him enough strength to give this white soldier a good thrashing. Then they were put in cells, three in each.

These cells were small and unhealthy. The food was bad too. They were given a cup of tea with gur instead of sugar and with no milk for breakfast. Their midday meal consisted of a chapati and dal and for dinner they got just a chattak of rice and some dal.

Over and above that, they were well fed on filthy

language by the British tommies. When they were put into the cells, all their personal possessions were confiscated. When they complained about this, all they got was a lot of filthy abuse.

For three days they were kept in these cells. Then they were removed to an open camp where conditions were somewhat better. Here they were guarded not by men of the Corps of Military Police but by ordinary soldiers of the Border Regiment. These British soldiers at first showed no interest in their prisoners, they were even contemptuous. They had been told that these men had taken part in communal riots. For about two days they did not bother to speak to the ratings.

On the third day, a curious young Scottish lad asked them what their trouble was. Then they got to know the true story. Soon the story of the RIN ratings spread to the others and the attitude of most of the soldiers changed. They became quite friendly and life became at least bearable.

The Boards of Enquiry continued to function unconcerned with strikes, hunger-strikes and disturbances. The so-called harmless elements had been eliminated by this time and sent back to their ships and establishments. Now came the turn of the "real culprits."

Gradually a number were gathered together who were to be dismissed from the Navy as 'unsuitable' for retention in the service. The first batch of these ratings left Mulund on April 5.

It was a touching scene. Everyone was in tears. The bitter and long fight and the sufferings endured together had cemented the friendship among these boys; a deep love had grown between them; they had come to feel as if they were members of one family.

Now they were to be separated. They did not know when or whether they would meet again. They could not guess what would happen to those who were being left behind. Had the leaders who had promised that there would be no victimisation forgotten them? They wondered.

As the time of parting approached, they all felt more and more sad, those who were left behind and those who were going out into the world which they all loved so much.

One thought seemed to give them hope. "Freedom's battle has yet to be fought. The struggle lies ahead. Who

knows, during that struggle we shall certainly meet again, somewhere, on some battlefield."

In different ways, in different languages, they repeated this thought. Yes, they would meet again. They would meet in the struggle for freedom. As the ratings left, the others cheered them in farewell. Defying the barbed wires, the grim faces of the hated officers, the proud Union Jack fluttering in the wind, rang the voices of the ratings:

"Inquilab Zindabad!"... "Jai Hind!"...

The neighbouring hills echoed and re-echoed:

"Inquilab Zindabad!" ... "Jai Hind!" ...

Yes. The men in the forces had taken up the slogans of the people once and for all.

Gradually, Mulund Camp began to be emptied out. Some went to the discharge camp, to fill in their papers prior to their dismissal; others faced farcical trials and were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment followed by dismissal.

Life at the Discharge Camp was not too pleasant either. The living conditions were bad but it was only for two days. They decided to bear it. After all they were to be free in two day's time.

When the long process of discharge began, they found many more surprises awaiting them. They were asked to hand over kit which had been issued to them nearly six years back. Some had been lost, some were in bits. Everything was jotted down in the big book against their accounts. Even their civilian clothes were taken off them at the point of the bayonet.

When they went to the Accounts Officer to collect their pay they were told that there was nothing for them; actually there were debit balances against their names. If they wanted an explanation it was usually refused. Sometimes a complicated account was shown which meant nothing to most of them. They were even told that they had lost and torn their kit and had to pay for it!

Well, at last they were ready to go; they only needed their discharge certificates. But before that there was a final little ceremony to be gone through.

The CO of the Discharge Camp called them up one by one and read the set formula:

"The CO of your ship has charged you with taking a

leading part in the mutiny and has recommended for your discharge and this has been confirmed."

Some of them asked for a fair trial by court martial. The reply was always the same: there was no hope; it had all been decided and finished and the case was closed.

Penniless, without clothes, without any food and under armed escort, they were taken to the station, put on a train bound for their homes and ordered never to return to Bombay again.

At last the 'mutiny' was over, thought the British military authorities. 'Discipline' had been restored. Pledges to the ratings? Assurances to the leaders? Those could conveniently be forgotten, for the leaders were busy negotiating for the freedom of India through constitutional means and the people divided into two camps were dreaming of the success of their leaders' task. The heroic ratings had been forgotten.

TOWARDS A PEOPLE'S NAVY

THE RIN ratings and the story of their historic uprising seemed forgotten in the welter of events that followed.

In the meantime, however, to meet the pressing demands of the people and to carry on a policy of ruthless repression behind some sort of a smoke-screen, the Government of India appointed a Commission to enquire into the Naval strike. After taking the testimony of hundreds of witnesses, RIN officers, British and Indian ratings and Chief Petty Officers and Petty Officers, and after visiting the various centres of the RIN and the scenes of the greatest disturbances during the February days, the Commission finally submitted their report, on July 19, 1946. This was some three months after they began their work.

No steps were taken to publish their report till the Congress and League leaders took power at the Centre. It was only then that a summary was prepared by the Defence Department. It was printed and ready for publication by October 22, but it was not released to the Press till January 20, 1947. It is obvious that the members of the new Indian Government at the Centre had to exert all their influence to rescue the report from the unwilling hands of the brass-hats at GHQ.

These Blimps had every reason to withhold the Report from the public. The findings of the Commission, as available in the Summary which has been published, fully justify the stand taken by the strikers. The Report has rightly stressed the long-standing genuine grievances of the ratings as the main cause of the strike.

The Report categorically states:

"The basic cause of the Mutiny in the Commission's opinion is the widespread discontent among the naval ratings arising primarily from a number of unredressed grievances, aggravated by the political situation."

The list of grievances provided in the Report conclusively proves that the demands of the ratings were just. It is a formidable list—false recruiting propaganda, painting rosy pictures of life in the RIN, ill-treatment of the ratings and racial discrimination by officers (mostly European), bad food, inadequacy of pay and allowances, insufficient promotions from the ranks, the haphazard process of demobilisation, ineffective resettlement schemes, unjustifiably close adherence to RN regulations unsuited to the needs of India's Navy.

Though the white officers tried to prove before the Commission that the strike was not due to genuine and unredressed grievances but to the instigation of outside political parties, the Commission categorically stated that politics were only a contributory factor. From the facts available in the Report it is obvious that the men who led the strike were not merely fighting for the redress of their grievances but were also imbued with a high sense of patriotism. The full story of those historic days reveals the fact that the ratings were inspired by the mass upheaval in the country, by the heroic struggles of their people for the final liberation from the tyranny of foreign rule.

The report of the RIN Enquiry Commission conclusively proves the demands of the ratings were just and their struggle justified.

A year has passed since those days. It has been a year of many changes. The leaders of the Congress and the League, the men on the strength of whose promises the strike was called off, are together in the Interim Government. Today they have the power to fulfil their pledges, to change the conditions in the RIN.

But there has been no change in the RIN. White Officers, like Commander King, who by their vicious and insulting behaviour forced our ratings to come out on strike, still flourish happily in India, in the RIN, and continue to draw fat salaries from Indian coffers. But the patriotic men, proud sons of India, who refused to stand their insults and with their blood wrote a golden chapter in the history of our national movement, are today out on the streets, looking for jobs or still rotting in jail.

The strikers had surrendered not to the threat of the British but to the Indian people and because of their faith in the pledges given to them by the leaders of the Congress

and the League. Yet, in the statement issued by the Interim Government together with the Summary of the RIN Enquiry Report, there is not a word about the victimised ratings, not a single one of them has been taken back. The main pledges of the national leaders remain unfulfilled.

In concluding their Report, the Enquiry Commission suggested that the RIN Regulations, which are at present based on the RN Regulations, should be changed to meet the requirements of India in its present conditions. Yet, Sir Geoffrey Miles, the Commander-in-Chief, RIN, categorically declared at a Press Conference at New Delhi, on February 8, 1947, that he did not visualise any change in the regulations of the Indian Navy. He admitted that the RIN Regulations were modelled on those of the RN, to facilitate close collaboration during war.

It seems that the British intend to keep the RIN, so vital to the needs of India's defence, only as a second fiddle to their Imperial Navy. They want to keep our Navy weak in ships and armament, packed with unpatriotic mercenaries, completely dependent on the Royal Navy and incapable of independently defending India's vast shores. That seems to be the only explanation for the refusal to reinstate those patriotic RIN strikers who have been victimised and for the refusal to change the RIN Regulations.

Today we have a National Government at the Centre. They have already declared their intention "to build up [in the RIN] a national service responsible to the national will, proud of its record in war and looking forward to a fine future". The time has now come to fulfil these pledges to the nation as a whole and especially to our men in the Navy. Our Government must take immediate steps to completely nationalise and democratise our Navy.

All European officers, from Sir Geoffrey Miles to the youngest sub-Lieutenant, must be sacked. It is they who still carry on the same vicious tyranny and discrimination which caused the strike of February 1946 and the recent outbursts in HMIS *Kukri* and *Venduruthy*; it is they who are trying to sabotage the nationalisation of our Navy and keep it weak and ever dependent on the RN.

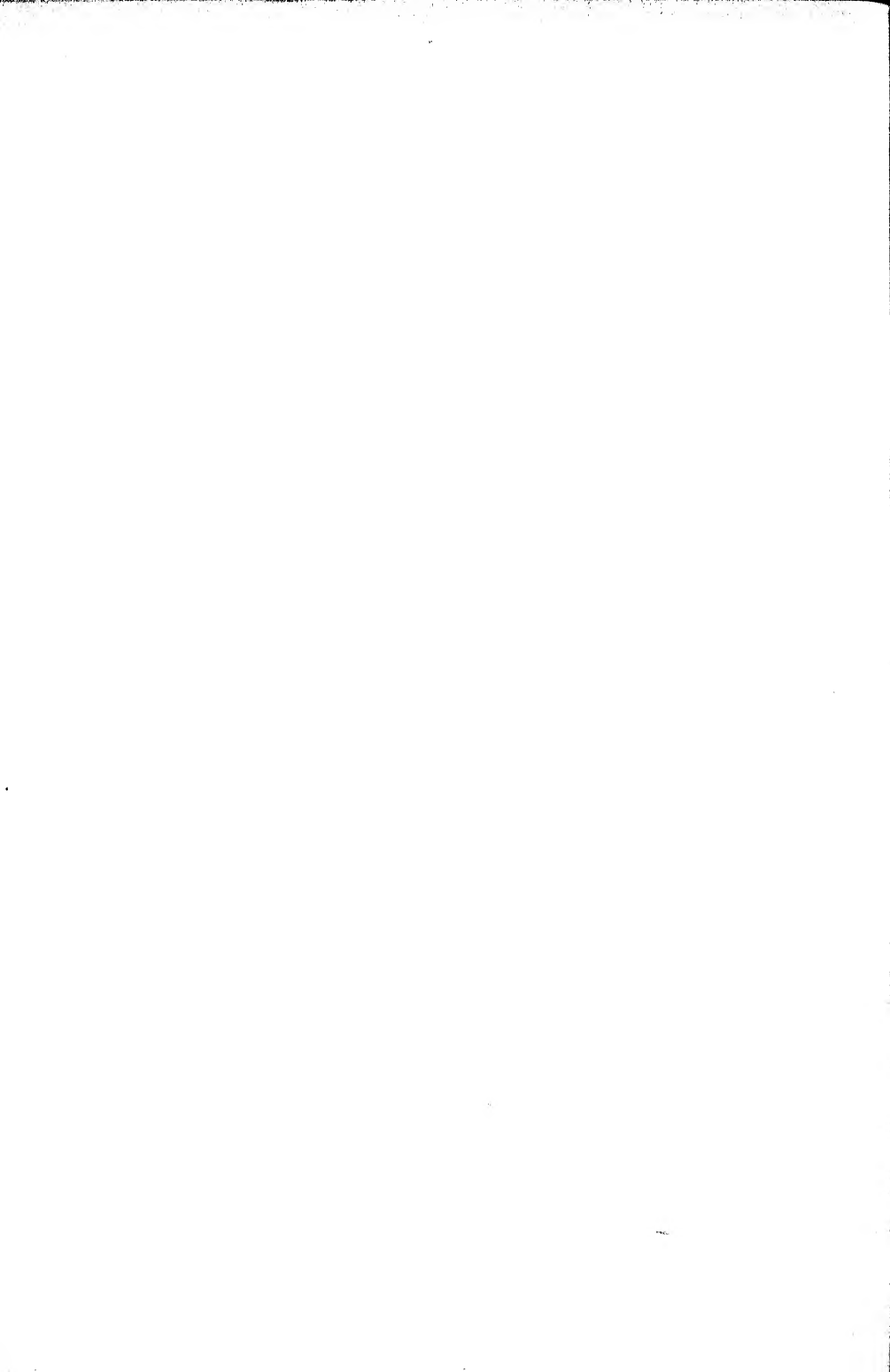
The findings of the RIN Enquiry Commission have completely justified the struggle of our ratings. Their demands have been proved to be just. All the victimised ratings

must be reinstated, for they will form the hard patriotic core of our national Navy. All their grievances connected with pay and allowances, food, welfare and amenities, ill-treatment by officers etc. must immediately be removed. Life in the Navy must be made attractive to all patriotic Indian youth.

In order to make the RIN "a national service responsible to the national will", our officers and men in the Navy must immediately be given the minimum democratic rights of free access to political literature, the right to attend public meetings, the right to unfettered contact with the people. Immediate steps must be taken to democratise the Indian Navy.

The Interim Government must rescue our Navy from the hands of the Blimps who still dominate our entire armed forces, redress the grievances of the ratings, fulfil the pledges made to them.

This is the way to transform the imperialist navy of occupation to a real people's navy, a navy "responsible to the national will, proud of its record in war and looking forward to a fine future", a navy of liberation, a navy strong enough to help us to achieve freedom and to defend it.



A DIARY OF EVENTS

February 18 — February 23, 1946

HMIS TALWAR

February 18:

- 8 a.m. - Central Communication Office ratings walk out of mess because of bad food.
- 8-30 - Refuse to attend parade.
- 9-30 - Remote Control Office ratings also come out on strike.
- 10 - Strike at **Talwar** complete, involving over 1,000 ratings, to protest against insulting behaviour of Commander King, the CO, and for the redress of grievances relating to pay, welfare and amenities, discrimination, etc.
- 11 - Lt. Kohli and Lt. Nanda ask ratings to formulate grievances but receive no response.
- 12 - Flag Officer Bombay, Rear-Admiral Rattray, arrived with Capt. Inigo-Jones, offers to remove Commander King and appoint Inigo-Jones as CO. Ratings refuse and demand Indian officer. Demand refused, but ratings asked to formulate grievances through representatives.
- 6 p.m. - A.I.R. broadcasts news of strike in **Talwar**.
- Night - News spreads to 11 shore establishments, 45 ships, 11 miscellaneous ships and 4 flotillas in and around Bombay.
- 9-30 - BBC broadcasts news of strike at **Talwar**.

Through the night the ratings in various ships and establishments, both in India and abroad, discuss and plan to join the strike.

February 19:

- 5-30 a.m. - Time for morning parade but ratings in Castle

Barracks, Fort Barracks and other shore establishments are on strike.

- 6 - First signs of activity in shore establishments.
- 6-30 - Bugle for cleanship duties in shore establishments but ratings refuse to go to work.
- Bugle for first parade on ships ignored.
- 8 - Ratings from Fort Barracks march out for breakfast; ratings from Castle Barracks start procession to **Talwar**.
- On ships, the ceremony of pulling down the White Ensign and hoisting the Congress, League and Red Flags begins, with HMIS **Punjab** showing the way.
- 11-45 - Processions of ratings from different parts begin to pour into **Talwar**.
- 12-30 p.m. - General meeting of all RIN ratings at **Talwar**. Leaders relate incidents leading to strike and formulate common demands.
- 1 - Meeting ends and ratings disperse.
- 1-30 - Journalists visit **Talwar**.
- 2 - More ratings arrive at **Talwar** from establishments in the suburbs.
- 2-15 - A procession leaves **Talwar** to parade round the Fort Area.
- 3-30 - FOB Rattray arrives and confers with strike leaders.
- 4-30 - Meeting ends.
- 9 - Secret meeting of ratings at HMIS **Chamak**, at Karachi.
- Night - Throughout the establishments and ships in Bombay, a night of discussions and preparations for the next stage of the struggle. Elections to Naval Central Strike Committee.

February 20

- 2 a.m. - Ratings from HMIS **Hamla** march to Castle Barracks. Strike begins at Calcutta, Karachi and other ports in India.
- 8 - Fort Barracks march out to go to **Talwar**.
- 8-30 - Castle Barracks emptied.
- 9-30 - Meeting of ratings in processions at the Oval grounds.
- 10 - All ratings reach **Talwar**. Meeting starts.
- 11 - First meeting of the Naval Central Strike Committee.

M. S. Khan elected president and Negotiating Committee appointed for negotiations with authorities and political parties.

12-30 p.m. - Meeting of NCSC ends.

- 1 - Ratings from HMIS Akbar reach Talwar.
- 2 - FOCRIN orders all ratings to return to barracks or ships by 3:30 or face arrest.
- 3 - Most ratings return to ships or barracks.
- 3-30 - Maratha guards surround all establishments.
- 4-30 - NCSC issues statement to Press on FOCRIN's orders and demands withdrawal of military.
- 6-30 - Conversation begins between Khan and Negotiating Committee and FOB and FOCRIN at former's bungalow.
- 8 - Meeting ends. No agreement reached. FOCRIN promises to issue rations immediately on new scale suggested by ratings but refuses to withdraw military guards and demands unconditional surrender.
- 8-30 - Meeting of NCSC.
- 9 - Food brought into Castle Barracks by Naval Lieutenant in accordance with FOCRIN's orders. Second secret meeting at Karachi, decision to strike taken.
- 10 - Meeting of NCSC ends after review of situation and instructing all ratings not to consume food provided by authorities.
- Night - There was considerable tension everywhere and a feeling that something might happen at any moment. Preparations for armed resistance if attacked.

February 21

- 7-30 a.m. - Ratings from ships gather in the Dockyards.
- 9 - Military guards open fire on Castle Barracks. At Karachi ratings from HMIS Bahadur break barracks and march to Chamak.
 - 10 - Short spells of fighting continue. Khan arrives at Dockyards and addresses ratings on situation.
 - 10-30 - Khan leaves for Narbada. At Karachi first attack on Hindustan repulsed.
 - 11-30 - NCSC meets on board Narbada, plans to meet offensive prepared and orders sent to various ships.

- 1 p.m. - Meeting ends.
- 1-30 - Violent British offensive begins. Main attack on Castle Barracks but diversionary attacks on ships as well. Ships reply with guns and Castle Barracks returns the fire.
- 2 - All ratings meet at **Chamak**, Karachi.
- 2-30 - FOCRIN broadcasts message to strikers and threatens to destroy the Navy. RIAF procession in Fort area.
- 3 - British military attack ceases but stray shooting continues.
- Civilians start pouring in at the Gateway of India carrying food parcels for the ratings. Motorboats come and pick these up.
- 3 - Khan orders cease-fire.
- 4-25 - Khan's signal announcing his meeting with FOCRIN.
- 7 - NCSC meets, reviews situation, issues statement to Press on FOCRIN's broadcast and summary of news to ratings.
- Night - It was a night of anxious expectation.

February 22

Morning papers bring appeals from the Communist Party, the NCSC and the Bombay Students' Union calling upon the people of Bombay to go on strike in sympathy with the ratings. Also FOCRIN's broadcast and Sardar Patel's statement asking the people not to go on strike.

A successful strike and hartal in the entire city of Bombay.

- 10-25 a.m. - All-out attack on **Hindustan**, Karachi. Ship surrenders after 30-minute gun battle.
- 11 - Godfrey calls for unconditional surrender in a statement broadcast to the ratings and threatens to use all force at his command.
- 2-30 p.m. - Formation of aircraft fly over Bombay.
In the meantime clashes between the police and military on one side and the people on the other had begun.
- 3 p.m. - Meeting at Fort Barracks of ratings who had returned from the city. Speeches express horror at police and military atrocities and determination to continue the struggle.
- 5-30 - Khan's message calling upon ratings to continue struggle and not to surrender unconditionally. Throughout

the day Khan busy negotiating with the authorities and the National leaders. Communist Party calls public meeting at Karachi and declares strike on 23rd.

- 6 - Khan arrives at the docks, conveys Sardar Patel's message and advises ratings to surrender.
- 7 - Statement issued to Press by NCSC.
- 11-30 - Final meeting of NCSC.

February 23

- 5-30 a.m. - Meeting still continues. No agreement reached. Majority in favour of continuing struggle. Khan announces **Talwar** decision to surrender.
- 5-35 - **Free Press Journal** phones Jinnah's message of sympathy.
- 5-45 - Khan's resolution accepting surrender put to the vote and passed by thirty votes to six.
- 6 - Khan leaves to inform FOB.
- 6-30 - Final message to the people of Bombay from the NCSC.
- 7-35 - FOB's message ordering ships and establishments to hoist Black Flags and prepare for surrender ceremony.
- 8 - FOB begins his tour of ships and establishments.
- Complete hartal at Karachi.
- 11 - 30,000 people gather at Idgah Maidan, Karachi. Sec. 144 declared and three Communist leaders arrested on the spot. People defy ban.
- 12-30 p.m. - Tear-gas attack by police. People retaliate with stones. This is followed by police firing.
- Evening - Joint Congress, League, Communist Peace Squads appeal to people to disperse.

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